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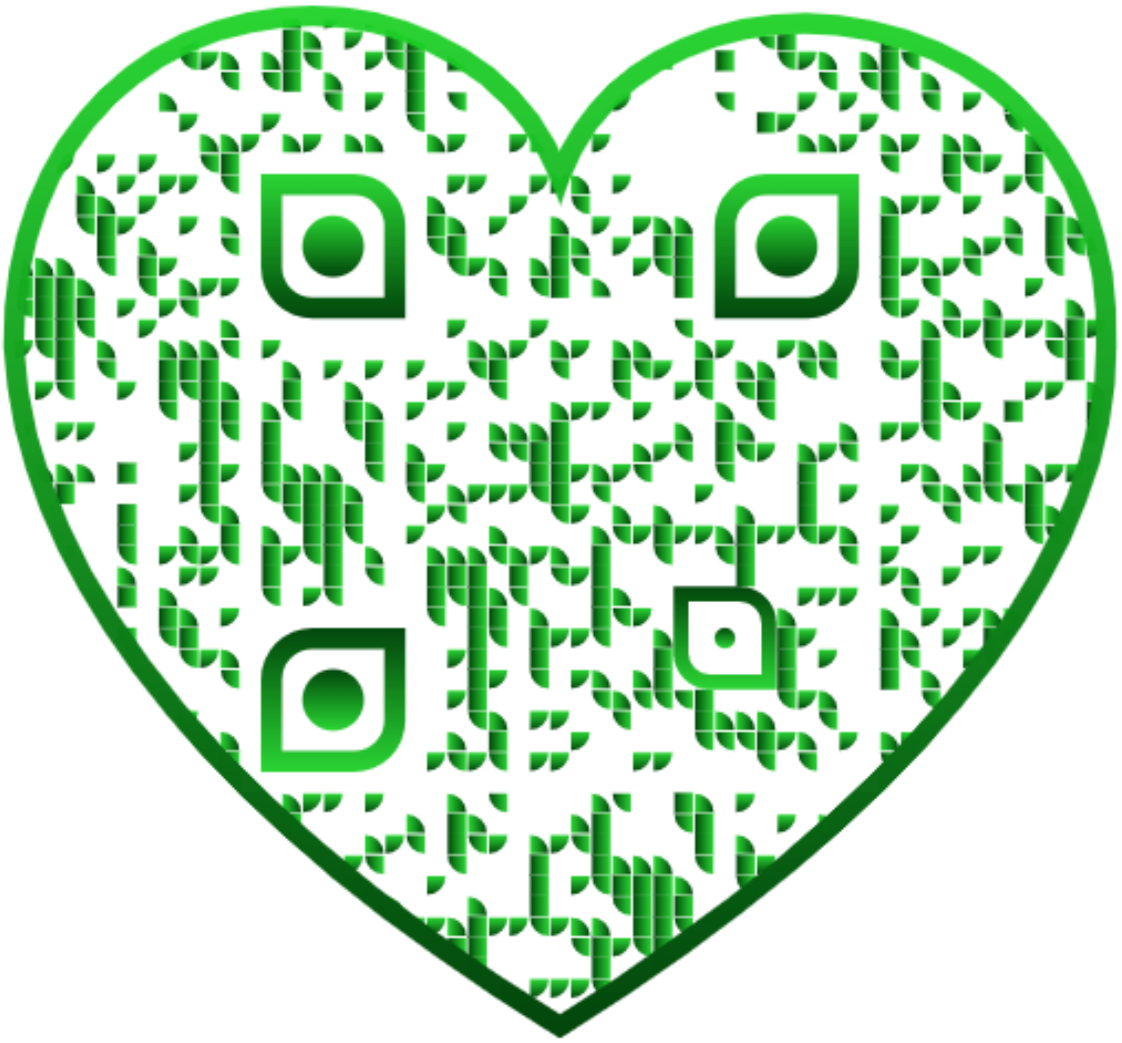

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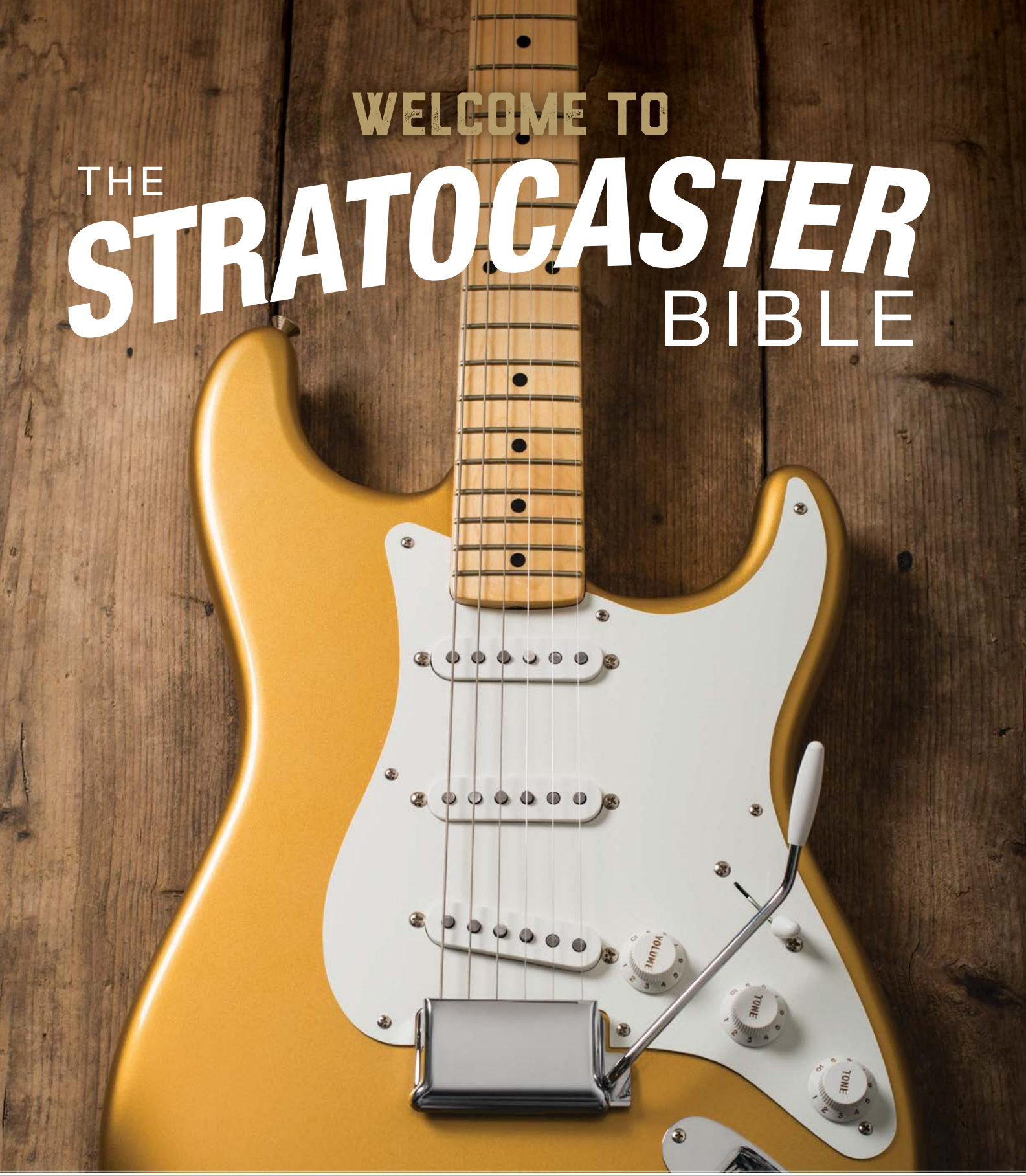

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THE STRATOCASTER BIBLE

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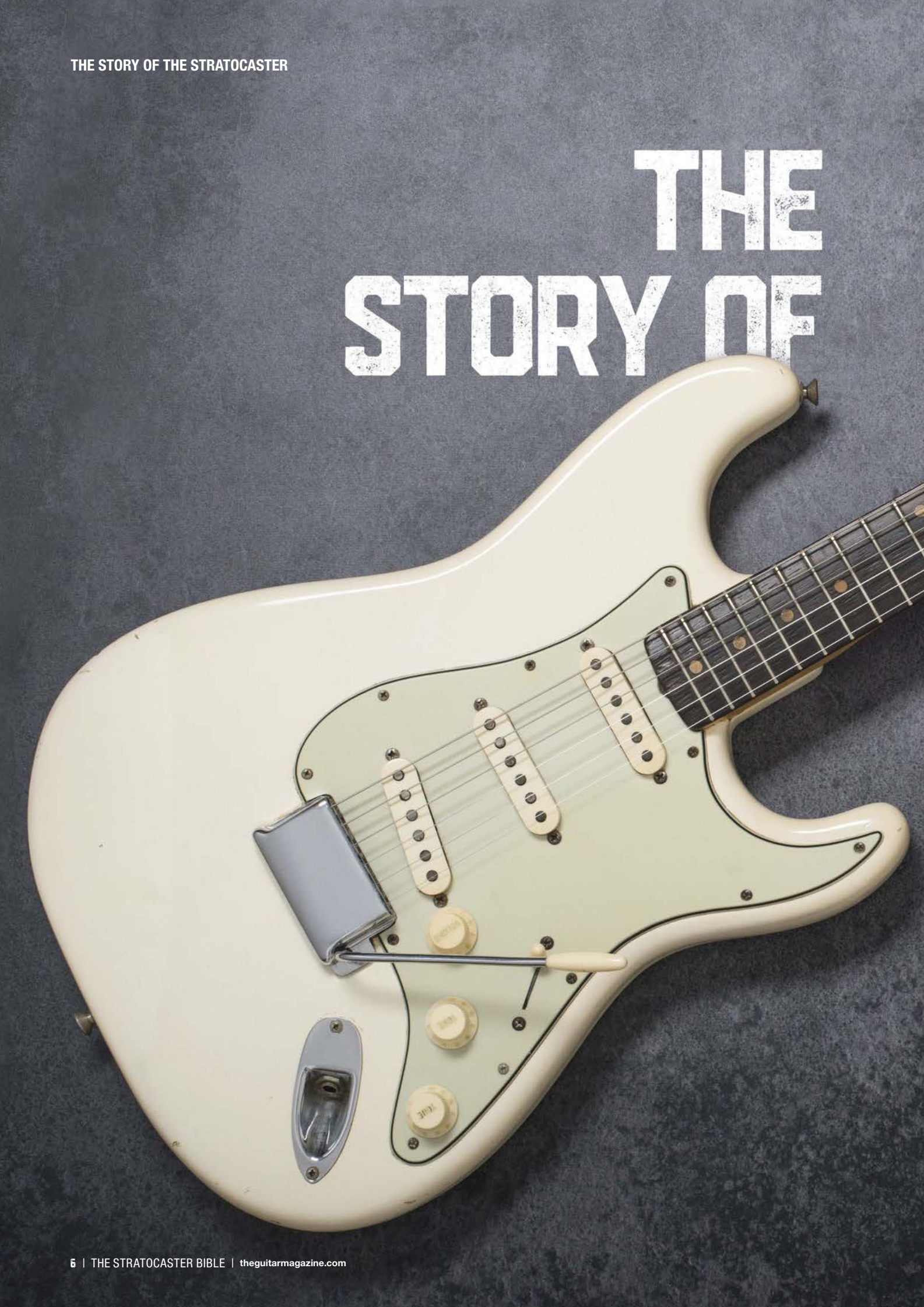
THE STORY OF



THE STRATOCASTER

Introduced to an unsuspecting world 64 years ago, Leo Fender's Stratocaster quickly became a modern icon. But what factors set it so far ahead of its opposition, and how did its design evolve? Michael Heatley investigates...

The shape and sound of the Fender Stratocaster seem to have been with us forever. It resides deep in the DNA of generations of guitarists, and ownership of a Strat is surely a rite of passage for any serious six-stringer on their way through a musical life. More than six decades after its introduction, the Strat has never gone out of production, has rarely gone out of fashion, and remains the choice of countless players today.

More than any other guitar, its shape somehow encapsulates sex appeal in its elegant curves. Launched in 1954, the Strat certainly stood out in comparison to the utilitarian Telecaster, Fender's first solidbody Spanish-style electric. Echoes of the classic American autos of the period are unmistakeable, and just as every US teen dreamt of borrowing daddy's wheels, even nerdish, bespectacled Buddy Holly acquired a certain aura when he strapped on a Strat.

It was all down to the Strat's then-revolutionary double-cutaway format. This offered clear advantages in terms of both balance and access to the upper fretboard, and would soon become something of an industry standard. It had actually derived from the Precision Bass, the Tele's four-string counterpart, which had needed its upper bout or horn extending to balance the 34-inch scale instrument's neck-heaviness.

Where the Telecaster – and, indeed, Gibson's Les Paul – both offered two pickups, the Strat went one better with neck, middle and bridge single-coils. Last but far from least, the biggest innovation it offered for its $249.50 price tag was its so-called 'tremolo' bridge – more accurately, a vibrato unit. The ability to use a 'whammy bar' would soon become one of the basic guitar-playing skills and in time, in the hands of Jimi Hendrix and his followers, change the face of rock music.

FULLER HOUSE

Let's backtrack to the birth of Leo Fender's babe. It followed two important happenings in 1953: the acquisition of three new buildings in Fullerton, California that would increase Fender's production by almost 100 per cent, and the recruitment of steel guitarist Freddie Tavares to the management team, adding a musician's input to the mix. Forrest White and Don Randall – production and sales chiefs respectively – were the other midwives to the birth of the Strat.

The outspoken Randall desired a sexier product to compete with the 'bound necks and purfling' of their Gibson rivals, considering the Telecaster to be 'plain vanilla' by comparison. The Telecaster's sharp edges gave way to a smoothly contoured body with a scoop at the rear, aka the tummy cut, allowing closer proximity to the player. Its 25.5-inch scale was longer than Gibson's 24.75 inches, and the sound was always going to be brighter.

The recessed jack socket was a futuristic touch in keeping with a name that echoed the space race; it also lessened the risk of damage should a lead be stepped on. Likewise the flat headstock (most headstocks were angled back) made neck breaks unlikely; it retained the straight string pull of the Tele, a 'tree' keeping the thinnest pair in place, but the earlier guitar's skinny headstock shape was given a fuller and ultimately more iconic profile.

The shape of the Strat, especially its six-in-a-row headstock, was remarkably similar to that of a solid-bodied guitar built in 1948 for country picker Merle Travis by Paul Bigsby. The former motorbike mechanic of course went on to specialise in developing the vibrato tailpiece – which, ironically, his instrument did not have.

The Strat's three controls, well within reach of the picking hand, comprised a master volume (top) plus tone controls for the neck and middle pickups. The material used (polystyrene thermoplastic) yellowed with age and would be replaced by ABS plastic in 1957.

Tone modification was not considered a necessary requirement for the bridge, the brightest pickup of the three. An early example of Strat's contrasting tones can be heard on Buddy Holly's *Peggy Sue*, where Crickets rhythm guitarist Niki Sullivan flipped the selector switch of Holly's guitar from the neck to the bridge pickup for the solo.

TREMS AND TRIBULATIONS

Although some players such as Robert Cray prefer the 'hardtail' version with a fixed bridge, while Eric Clapton disables his with a block of wood, it's fair to say that vibrato and the Stratocaster go together.

SALES CHIEF DON RANDALL DESIRED A SEXIER PRODUCT TO COMPETE WITH THE 'BOUND NECKS AND PURFLING' OF THEIR GIBSON RIVALS

The first version of the vibrato tailpiece – or the 'synchronized tremolo' bridge, as Fender inaccurately termed it – was scrapped, at a cost of $5,000, before the now-familiar self-contained unit was alighted upon. Altering the strings' pitch was made possible by passing them over a floating bridge and anchoring them in a cavity at the back of the body. The necessary

tension was provided by five springs, also in the cavity, though some guitarists would reduce their number to three.

Leo Fender filed a patent application for his 'synchronized tremolo' in 1954, the year the Stratocaster came to market – and, thanks to the Strat's success, it quickly became the industry standard. Because bridge and tailpiece moved together, it was significantly more stable and less prone to tuning and intonation issues than its competitors. A bridge cover was supplied that was invariably discarded by players (or used as an ashtray).

While the Tele had struggled by on three string saddles, the Stratocaster had individual saddles for better intonation – made of pressed steel until 1971, and then cast. This was one of several innovations specified by western swing guitarist Bill Carson who, since 1951, had supplied Leo with musicians' savvy. (He'd also lobbied for four pickups, but was unsuccessful.)

Carson was keen on the vibrato unit as, with judicious use of a volume pedal, he could simulate a steel guitar and thus be paid double rates at recording sessions. In terms of creating new sounds, guitarists quickly found the three-way pickup selector switch – a standard item inherited from Leo Fender's earlier radio repair workshop – could be wedged to yield neck-and-centre or bridge-and-centre. These combinations can be heard in the playing of Eric Clapton, JJ Cale and Mark Knopfler.

THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELEVISED

The Stratocaster was launched with a suitably large fanfare, Don Randall telling the *Music Trades* paper that "this instrument will revolutionise the style of guitar-playing". Yet the release of the album *The Chirping Crickets* in 1957 did more for the instrument than any ad campaign ever could. Not only was the music stunning, the fact that bandleader Buddy Holly was pictured with his sunburst Strat on the sleeve made the connection crystal clear.

In Britain, the Stratocaster's bespectacled main-man was Hank B Marvin. Having worked his way through an Antoria and a Vega to a Hofner Committee,

VOLUME
TONE
TONE

he couldn't wait to get his hands on the Strat with vibrato arm, birdseye maple neck and gold-plated hardware they saw in the brochure. "It arrived in this magnificent tweed flat case with lovely plush red lining. It looked a treat – it was flamingo pink. You didn't have to play it, you just had to hang it round your neck and the audience would be totally impressed."

The instrument was actually bought for Hank by his bandleader, Cliff Richard, as the guitarist couldn't afford the £120 it took to import it. Ironically Marvin hadn't realised his idol James Burton, the fleet-fingered player who worked with Ricky Nelson before switching to back Elvis Presley, actually played a Telecaster! One genuine Stateside Strat-man who inspired Jeff Beck and many more was Johnny Meeks from Gene Vincent's Blue Caps.

THE FINISH LINE

The Stratocaster itself changed relatively little in its first half-decade – but changes there were. The body wood switched from ash to alder in 1956 for all but Blonde examples, while the utilitarian one-piece maple neck with no separate fingerboard would be replaced as standard in mid-1959 by a rosewood board over maple. Some players credited this combination with a warmer sound. In addition, the flatter profile C-shaped neck replaced the sharper V profile.

Strats with rosewood fingerboards had 'slab' necks; when removed and viewed from the body end, the joint between fingerboard and neck was a straight line. The 'veneer board' that replaced it from mid-'62 was thinner, with the base cambered to match the top. This was apparently intended to increase the neck's stability in different climates – but, in a pattern that would repeat over time, the older model became more of a collector's item.

The standard finish of the 60s Strat was three-colour sunburst, yellow being stained into the wood before painting red and brown on top. In 1964 the yellow was sprayed, too, allowing Fender to use alder with flaws, as the new process didn't show as much grain. But custom colours based on the Dupont range of auto paints such as Candy Apple Red and Olympic White had become all the rage, a five per cent upcharge making the 1969 list price of a custom-colour Strat a slighty inflated $367. The combination of car colours and those auto-inspired curves was alluring... and the optional matching headstock was the icing on the cake.

Talking of cars, Fender was to guitars what Ford was to motor vehicles, and for all its good looks the Strat was made for mass production. The pickups were originally mounted on a single-ply pickguard which concealed the body routing (a three-layer celluloid pickguard was introduced in mid-1959), while the original maple neck had frets inserted directly into it. The end result was a guitar that was simple to make and so durable that, when bluesman Buddy Guy's guitar case fell off the roof rack of his car while in Africa in 1969 and opened on the road, his Strat "got scratched up, but only the E string was out of tune".

LEFT TURN

Much changed when CBS took over Fender in 1965, but the Strat remained very recognisable – with the odd exception. As well as the headstock being enlarged,

Headstock Hijinks

The Strat's headstock has changed more than perhaps any other element of the guitar over the years – here's how it happened

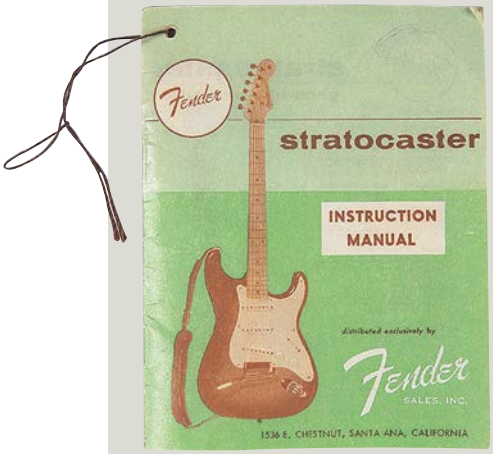
The first obvious major change in the shape of the Strat came in late 1965 when the headstock size was increased by around 10 per cent. This was supposedly to counteract warping, but many suspect it was to also give new owners CBS the chance to increase the size of the Fender decal. The word 'Stratocaster' was also enlarged to take advantage of television exposure. This new headstock size and shape, similar to that of the Jazzmaster and Jaguar, would remain standard through the 60s and 70s. Fender first tried to return to the small headstock for 1980s 'The Strat' model, but didn't get it quite right.

Chief designer Dan Smith's arrival at Fender in 1981 signalled both the start of his two-decade reign and the beginning of the end of the large headstock. The American Stratocaster, introduced in early 1987, was the first modern production Strat to have an authentically pre-CBS-style headstock. It's interesting, however, that Robin Trower opted to retain the larger version on his signature model, saying: "I figured a bit more wood on the neck would give it more resonance".

TIMELINE

SIX DECADES OF STYLE

A Stratocaster Timeline



1954 The Strat takes its bow as upmarket sister to the three year-old Telecaster

1956 Ash body gives way to alder on some finishes

1957 ABS plastic replaces polystyrene for knobs and pickup covers

1957 The Blonde/gold hardware 'Mary Kaye' becomes the first 'custom colour' Strat

1958 Red added to brown and yellow to create a three-colour sunburst

1959 Rosewood fingerboard becomes standard

1962 Slab fretboard gives way to thinner veneer

1964 Headstock logo changes to 'transition' style

1964 Clay position markers change to plastic pearl dots, side markers in 1965

1965 Celluloid (nitrate) pickguard replaced by vinyl/ABS, headstock is enlarged and 'F' neckplate introduced. CBS buys Fender for $13 million.

1968 Logo changes again to black, with model name in large capital letters

1971 Bullet truss-rod nut introduced at the headstock end

1971 Cast saddles replace pressed steel

1976 Serial number moves to peghead decal

1977 Middle pickup is reverse-wound. Five-way selector replaces three-way switch unit

1979 The Anniversary Strat appears to mark the Strat's 25th birthday

1980 Large headstock gives way to smaller pre-CBS original. Lurid 'international colours' supplement Sunburst, Blonde, black and natural finish options

1981 Fender recruits new management in Bill Schultz and Dan Smith

1982 Fender Japan founded, and starts production of Vintage Reissue series

supposedly to counter warping, a maple fingerboard option was offered in 1967, having previously been a custom order (the one-piece maple neck of the early 50s was reinstated as an option in 1970). And while the chemical formula of the nitrocellulose finish was changed to avoid the 'cracking' found on older Strats, the guitar was about to meet its match in the incendiary James Marshall Hendrix.

Hendrix, a southpaw, used right-handed instruments, turning the nut around and reversing the strings. The whammy, wah-wah, fuzz and Uni-Vibe (an electronic chorus/vibrato effect) combined with feedback to invent a whole new vocabulary of sounds for rock guitarists.

If anyone thought that the Stratocaster's time had gone with Hendrix's late-1970 death, Eric Clapton had other ideas. He switched to the instrument early in the new decade as he left his Gibsons and addictions behind and tried to rebuild his career in low-key fashion. He fashioned his favourite, named 'Blackie', from bits of a 1957 (the body), 1956 (the neck) and early 70s (pickups) instruments. With so many players taking their lead from him, it was inevitable there'd be another upsurge in the Strat's fortunes.

The 70s Stratocaster is poorly regarded by many, though Ritchie Blackmore and Robin Trower would beg to differ. Its truss rod – the essential metal stiffener inserted in the neck – moved adjustment point from the body end to the headstock, where it emerged in 'bullet' shape. The neck plate at the body end now had an adjustable tilting mechanism while the bolts securing neck and body were reduced from four to three – all modifications that failed to please purists.

MUCH CHANGED WHEN CBS TOOK OVER FENDER IN 1965, BUT THE STRAT REMAINED VERY RECOGNISABLE, ALBEIT WITH AN ENLARGED HEADSTOCK

At the same time the five-position pickup selector was introduced in 1977, the magnetic polarity of the middle pickup was changed. This reverse-winding gave a hum-cancelling effect when in the in positions two and four on the selector switch. This was the same principle as Gibson's humbucking pickup and Fender's own split-coil unit used by the post-1957 Precision Bass.

SUPER MACHINE

As it approached its 25th year, the Strat increasingly found itself becoming the template for other guitars. The 'Superstrat' – a term referring to Strat-shaped guitars equipped with humbuckers – would become the most popular hybrid guitar

Under New Management

CBS's buyout of Fender is a seminal moment in the journey of the Strat and Fender in general – here's some key differences between a pre- and post-CBS Stratocaster

When Leo Fender sold his company to CBS for a reported $13 million in 1965, it was producing 1,500 instruments a week, a good proportion of which were Strats, compared with the 40 a week output of just a decade earlier. Rock 'n' roll was sweeping the world, and it was easy to see what such a large conglomerate – already selling the recordings of Bob Dylan, The Byrds and others – saw in the operation. It was also widely assumed the pursuit of profit would see a decline in quality control.

The Strat had not been a product of automation in the early days; only operations like cutting slots for frets had been performed by dedicated machines. But CBS looked for ways to cut production time and, with it, costs.

The term 'pre-CBS' has since been used to justify the premium prices of instruments made before the takeover date. The 18-month 'transition' era from late summer 1964 to December 1965, preceded a new facility of some 120,000 square feet opening next to the existing Fullerton factory – and the Stratocaster was its main output.

Small changes were soon creeping in: 1967 saw Kluson tuners replaced by branded 'F'-stamped items, with buttons now chrome-plated plastic. The same year saw a polyurethane finish replace nitrocellulose, while in 1968 cloth shielding on wiring gave way to plastic. All logical changes, but ones that improved profit margin and made the older guitars more desirable by comparison. In fairness, however, CBS sold a huge number of guitars, mainly Strats, in the 70s when many other American manufacturers went out of business – but they wanted out and, in 1985, sold Fender's name and distribution for $12.5 million to a group of investors headed by president William Schultz. The company began to rebuild its reputation, and today stands back at the top of the tree.

TIMELINE
SIX DECADES OF STYLE

Continued...

1983 Japanese-made Squier Strats hit American market a year after their initial launch

1985 A management buyout separates Fender from CBS for $12.5 million

1986 The traditionally inspired American Standard Stratocaster revives the Fender brand

1988 The first signature Stratocaster, the Eric Clapton model, is introduced

1990 Stratocaster production begins in Fender's Ensenada, Mexico facility

1991 Leo Fender dies, aged 81

2004 The Strat Pack 50th anniversary concert at Wembley Arena celebrates the Strat's golden Anniversary, while new 50th Anniversary models aim to blend the old and new together

2014 60th Anniversary Strats include 'personality card' and solderless replaceable pickups

2017 The American Standard is superseded by the American Professional in Fender's catalogue

design of the 1980s after Eddie Van Halen combined his famous handmade 'Frankenstein' guitar and a Marshall head to create his eponymous group's debut album in 1978.

This inspired the rise of companies such as Jackson, Charvel and Ibanez, who specialised in S-type guitars designed for the new generation of rock guitar players. Fender reacted by offering models with a bridge humbucker option, known as 'Fat Strats', and later the HSH (humbucker-single-humbucker) configuration. A Floyd Rose vibrato-equipped Strat was also experimented with.

British metal guitarists Glenn Tipton of Judas Priest and Dave Murray of Iron Maiden both equipped their Fenders with retrofitted DiMarzio humbuckers. Murray, who retained a single-coil in the middle, now has his own signature Strat based on his workhorse 1957 model previously owned by Free's Paul Kossoff. Indeed, since 1998 many US-made Strats have been supplied with an HSH pickup rout under the pickguard so players can easily adopt this popular aftermarket configuration.

Yet profits were still dropping fast and 1983 saw Fender go down the completely opposite road, making economies on their US instruments such as the Stratocaster Standard. This appeared with only one tone knob and even lost the distinctive recessed jack socket that had been there since 1954.

Such cheapskate ideas only lasted a couple of years, while the similarly short-lived Elite Series Strat saw push buttons replace the time-honoured pickup selector switch. It also boasted a new 'Freeflyte' vibrato – and while the Elite failed to live up to its name, examples went on to command good prices on the vintage market for their rarity value.

THE STRATOCASTER HAS CHANGED RELATIVELY LITTLE OVER THE YEARS; WHEN YOU NAILED IT FIRST TIME, WHY CHANGE THE RECIPE?

DARKEST BEFORE THE DAWN

The early 80s saw CBS' attitude to the Strat pulled both ways. Bill Schultz and Dan Smith, imported from Yamaha as president and chief designer respectively, began making vintage reissues based on the Strat's original specifications – the four-bolt neck and small headstock – in a bid to resurrect the Strat's profile among serious players.

Fender finally broke free from CBS in a management buyout in 1985, the price paid ironically a touch less than Leo Fender had pocketed two decades earlier. Bill Schultz built a new factory in nearby Corona (the Fullerton plant did not come with the sale) and attempted a return to Fender's roots with the 1986 launch of the more traditional American Standard Strat.

Yet the guitar market was now being swamped with copies, and while the new factory was coming up to speed the gap was filled by Asian-made Fenders. Up until the 1980s the only genuine Stratocasters had been born in the USA, but the establishment in 1982 of Fender Japan, originally to sell to the Asian market, opened up a Pandora's Box, and in 1985 every guitar in the Fender catalogue was, out of necessity, Japanese-made.

NEW START

Since then Strats have been made all over the world; Japanese examples are still prized for their workmanship, while the Mexican-made Strat, which comes from just over the border in Ensenada, currently stands between the American models and the Asian-made Squiers in price. Manufacture of Squier Strats, the design licensed by Fender, started in Japan, migrated to Korea and now takes place in China and Indonesia.

The Strat king of the 1980s was undoubtedly Stevie Ray Vaughan, whose double whammy of 1983 debut album *Texas Flood* and playing on David Bowie's *Let's Dance* ensured the world heard his sweetly stinging Strat tones whatever they were listening to. An upside-down vibrato and personalised scratchplate were his guitar's visual trademarks.

Strats have continued to enjoy the patronage of star performers, and many have sought to upgrade hardware and/or pickups to give their instruments a degree of individuality. In turn, Fender has made available a number of similarly configured Strats to exploit these artists' fan following. By accident or design, these appear to have driven the Stratocaster's development for the past quarter of a century, innovations requested by endorsers finding their way to the wider market – an example was when Lace Sensor pickups were first introduced on the 1987 Strat Plus, originally intended as a Jeff Beck signature model.

The first signature Strat, made for Eric Clapton in 1988, featured three Lace Sensor (later Vintage Noiseless) pickups, 25dB active mid-boost circuit, V-neck profile and a blocked-off vintage-style vibrato. In 1991, Jeff Beck finally approved a Strat with Lace Sensor pickups – two at the bridge – a Wilkinson roller nut and a floating vibrato bridge set up to raise the G string three semitones... a Beck trademark.

An interesting twist came in 2008 when Smashing Pumpkins frontman Billy Corgan specified three DiMarzio humbuckers, each with a single-coil footprint. The result was a conventional-looking instrument with a hot output – a wolf in Strat's clothing?

IN THE DETAILS

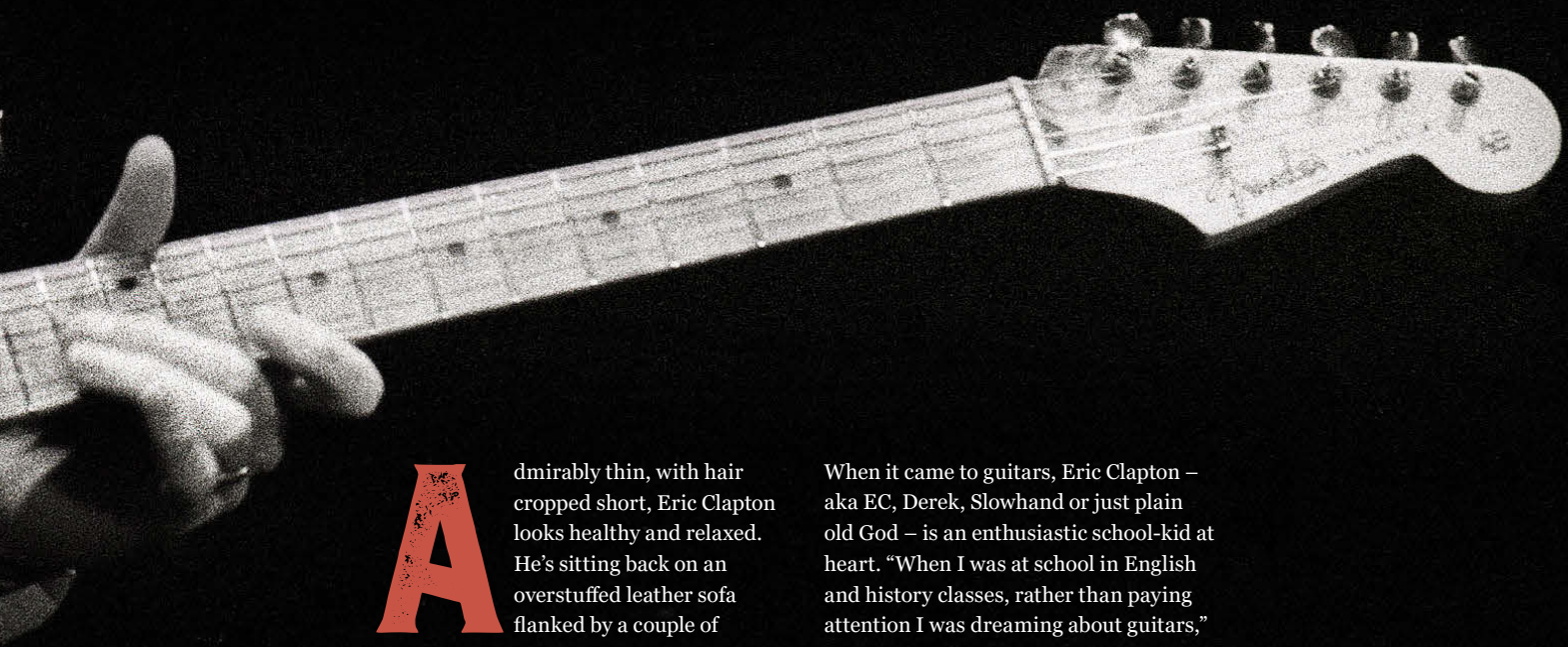
The Stratocaster has changed relatively little over the years except in detail; when you nailed it first time, why change the recipe? But as it's got older, its become an instrument that comes in flavours to suit almost any need or budget. From the modern, refined American Professional to the vintage-vibed American Originals, the road-ready, budget-friendly Player series to the Custom Shop's works of luthiery art, no matter who you are, there's probably a Stratocaster out there with your name on it.

Yet the one thing they all have in common is the shape that so beguiled the music world back in 1954 and has never been improved upon since. Don Randall said of the Telecaster: "Our rivals said any fool with a bandsaw could make a guitar like that." The Strat may have been much imitated but, with 65 years of hindsight, there's no doubt its stylish simplicity has never been bettered.

© Getty Images

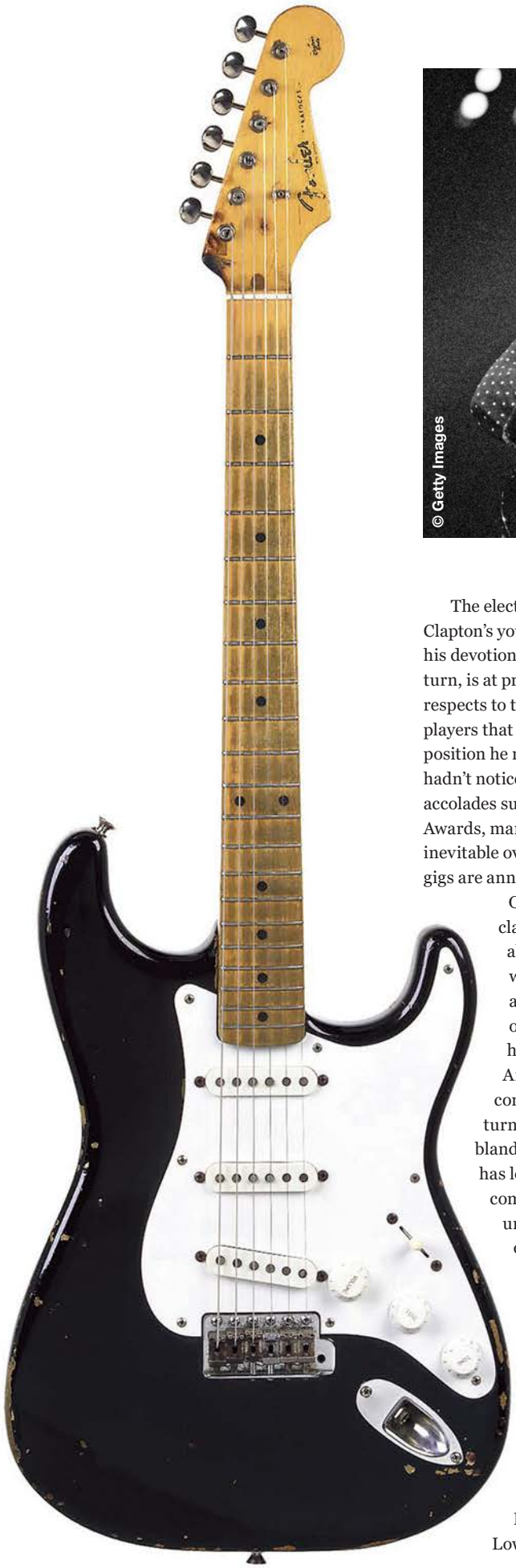
THE HAND OF GOD

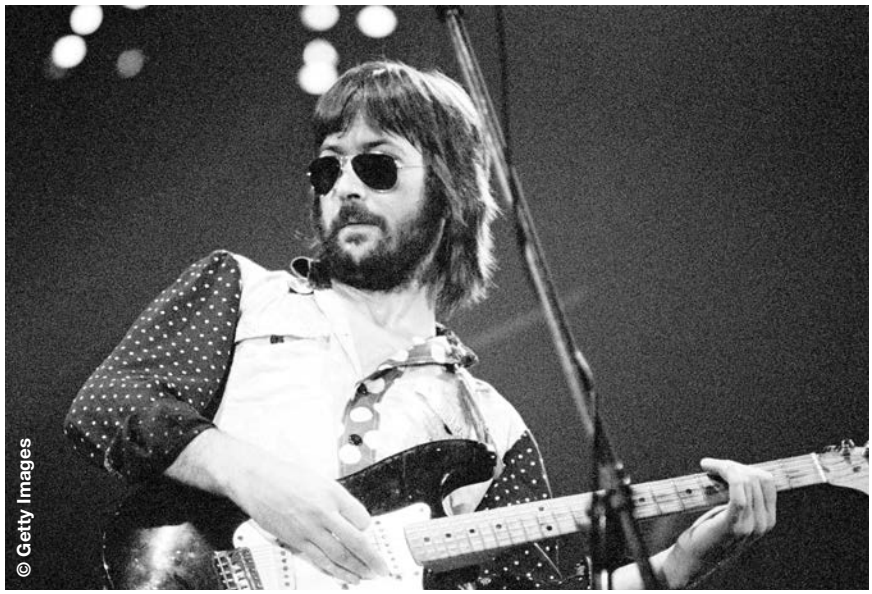
ERIC CLAPTON is one of the most iconic names in the history of rock music, a blues guitar legend, and to his legions of fans, he's simply 'god'... but Slowhand is also one of the world's foremost Stratocaster fans, so much so that Fender made him the Strat's first ever signature artist. Interviewed in 1994, Clapton revealed to Paul Trynka what the guitar means to him, his music, and the world at large...



Admirably thin, with hair cropped short, Eric Clapton looks healthy and relaxed. He's sitting back on an overstuffed leather sofa flanked by a couple of recently-acquired Fender Custom Shop Strats. Although by no means the most valuable guitars of a sprawling collection, they still inspire obvious affection.

When it came to guitars, Eric Clapton – aka EC, Derek, Slowhand or just plain old God – is an enthusiastic school-kid at heart. "When I was at school in English and history classes, rather than paying attention I was dreaming about guitars," he says. "I was drawing guitars instead of doing any work. That was how much I loved the guitar. I just loved to look at them. They were magical to me."





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The electric guitar, object of Eric Clapton's youthful idolatry, has paid back his devotion in spades – and Clapton, in turn, is at present intent on paying his respects to the instrument and the players that put him in the enviable position he now occupies. In case you hadn't noticed, that position has attracted accolades such as an armful of Grammy Awards, many best-selling albums, and the inevitable over-subscription whenever his gigs are announced.

Once criticised as an Armani-clad working class lad who'd abandoned his roots, Clapton won a new place in the public's affection with the admission of vulnerability that followed his son's tragic death in 1991. And while many of his contemporaries are content to turn out greatest hits packages and bland cover versions, the guitarist has long demonstrated his commitment to the blues, with uncompromising concert setlists drawing on the catalogues of Scrapper Blackwell, Robert Johnson, Big Maceo Merryweather and others. When we spoke to Eric for this interview he was in the process of recording *From The Cradle*, an album featuring a mixture of blues standards from such names as Muddy Waters, Tampa Red, Freddie King, Leroy Carr, Lowell Fulson and many others, and his ambition to follow in the footsteps of the original bluesmen would be emphasised again and again as names such as Otis Rush or Buddy Guy came up in conversation.

ROCK 'N' ROLL STAR

The Fender Stratocaster, the premier tool of Clapton's distinguished trade, is still a much-used instrument decades after its invention, and it's obvious that for him Leo Fender's classic design retains the magic it exuded the very first time he saw one.

"I guess the first Strat I ever saw was Buddy Holly's, on the cover of the first album, *The Chirping Crickets*. I couldn't figure it out. It didn't make any sense to me that it was just this solid piece of wood.

"Around that time I also saw this promotional film of Jerry Lee Lewis, where there was I think a Telecaster bass [Jay Brown, Lewis' bass player, was one of the first users of the Precision bass; he is shown using one in the film *High School Confidential*]. And that again was mind-blowing – a very futuristic sight.

"I think the only way you could fully appreciate its impact is to actually do a little bit of work, to examine the history of the guitar. You've got to be a sort of aficionado to fully understand the impact of the Stratocaster. You need to go back and see early footage of what people were playing at that time, and a lot of people were playing big, cumbersome instruments that were actually borrowed from the jazz world – like Bill Haley's guitar, or Scotty Moore's guitar. So the people who played on the early rock 'n' roll records were

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playing these big instruments that weren't actually sexy at all. They had a kind of intellectual connotation.

"But this guitar is rock 'n' roll – it was designed for people who play rock 'n' roll. And it's sexy, y'know? It has that whole thing, it's lustful, and it belongs in the rock 'n' roll genre. I don't think you'd look good playing jazz on it, or anything else... even country music. I think it's a rock 'n' roll guitar. In fact, I'll go further, and say that for me it's a blues guitar. Buddy Guy and Otis Rush, the people I really identify with, played that instrument."

BLUES HEADLINES

While Buddy Guy and Otis Rush would eventually become Clapton's musical mentors, he remembers his earliest influences as being the players who had made visits to the British folk/blues circuit, such as Jesse Fuller and Josh White, while practically all of the Yardbirds' blues repertoire was drawn from a single Chicago blues compilation album which contained tracks by Billy Boy Arnold (*I Wish You Would*), Snooky Prior, and others.

But although the supply of recorded blues might have been limited, Anthony 'Top' Topham – who handed guitar duties in the Yardbirds over to Clapton after Topham's parents decreed he was too young to go pro – remembers Eric having a special advantage. "Even in 1964, people were already talking about Eric as a guitarist. But one thing I found out later was that he had access to a lot of rare records through a blues DJ, Guy Stevens, who had records by Freddie King, Buddy Guy and others that hardly anyone else in England had ever heard. Eric would come up with these riffs, and we thought they were amazing. It wasn't until years later that I realised where they came from."

"THIS GUITAR IS ROCK 'N' ROLL – IT WAS DESIGNED FOR PEOPLE WHO PLAY ROCK 'N' ROLL"

The moment Clapton first encountered Freddie King was particularly pivotal. "There was an album called *Freddie King Sings The Blues* on King," Eric recalls, "And on the cover of that album he's playing a Les Paul – I think a Goldtop Les Paul. That was the sound I wanted, so I went after a Les Paul. So I was a Gibson man throughout my early career, but then I heard Buddy Guy for the first time, and I realised that he was playing a Strat. In the length of time I've been playing I've had a lot of favourites, but considering that Buddy is still alive and a young man, he has to be, I suppose, the greatest influence."

It was, of course, the Gibson Les Paul that accompanied Clapton's ascent to godlike status. Around the time he left the Yardbirds, frustrated by their pop leanings, Clapton acquired a Les Paul Standard and a Marshall 30-watt 1962 combo amp. Once he'd been persuaded to join the Bluesbreakers by John Mayall, Clapton used the pairing to devastating effect. His contemporary, Jimmy Page, commented later: "Eric was definitely the first person to exploit the Gibson/Marshall combination. I was producing him in 1965, and the engineer couldn't believe the noises he was getting. He just turned the tape machine off, and said, 'This is unrecordable.'"

Clapton looks back on his playing at that time as being heavily dominated by his

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influences: "I listen to records, and there'll be one line that's definitely Freddie King, one line that's BB King. And the line that joins them together is mine. That's the part that makes me go, 'That sounds like me' when I hear it on the radio."

HENDRIX HANG-UPS

Even so, Clapton's domination of the guitar field was undeniable – at least until the advent of Jimi Hendrix. Whereas Clapton's comments about Hendrix at the time were ambivalent, praising his musicianship while lamenting his unnecessary exhibitionism, these days he's more generous, admitting that, "What I was doing was just nowhere compared to what he was doing. I just kidded myself that we were on a par." And these days, rather than censure others' exhibitionism, he's more likely to criticise his own inhibitions.

"I loved that kind of showmanship. The first person I ever saw do it was Buddy Guy. Before Jimi arrived in England, Buddy came over and played the clubs, and he did all of it – playing the guitar behind his neck, between his legs, on the ground... that was the first time I ever saw it. But when it comes to me, I just can't do it, because it requires all my concentration just to play the guitar. I can't actually do anything else – I'm rigid. If I tried it, I would just lose my place.

"The ability to play and do other things is beyond me... stuff like Keith Richards, where he's playing rhythm and just moving around. Anyone that moves around and plays is just out of my league, let alone anyone like Pete [Townshend], or Jimi, who were doing things of an acrobatic nature. I have to totally concentrate to keep my finger on the string, and I can't get beyond that. I'd love to be able to do that stuff...

"I still can't figure out Jimi's playing. Every time I hear his music, I think, 'I know what that is, I can do that,' but in fact, I can't. I can't work out where it comes from. I mean, I've been backstage at the Albert Hall when he was out there, and I'd just walk by the backstage area and listen to it and I'd think it sounds to me like early BB King. It's a definite style. And then, if I'd stay and listen to it, I'd realise that it isn't. It isn't actually anything that you can pin down as belonging to anybody rather than Jimi – it's unique, and it's very jazz-orientated. It's like he's thinking through his playing a lot. I don't tend to do that."

NO MORE HEROES

In many ways, it was the arrival of Hendrix that would turn Clapton away from the 'guitar hero' role for a decade or more – and yet it was not Hendrix who turned him directly to the Strat. "There was something about the way Jimi played the Stratocaster that made it seem like it was off-limits to me," Clapton considers. "I thought, 'Well, I just can't become involved in all that, it's just too crazy.' And it wasn't until I saw Stevie Winwood, a little while later, playing a Strat, that it suddenly seemed accessible. I mean, here was a young white kid from Birmingham playing a Strat in a much more refined or simple way, and then I thought it was accessible to me.

"With Jimi, as far as I could see, getting as close as I got to him, he used a very basic Strat. I don't think he hotwired it at all, not in the time I knew him, anyway. He used pedals later on, but when I first saw Jimi play he was going straight into a Marshall. He didn't even have a wah-wah pedal at that point, he was just playing straight. And, of course, he didn't even play a left-handed guitar, he played a right-handed guitar which was completely stock.

"I suppose the one basic requirement, which is often overlooked is that the Stratocaster was virtually unbreakable, especially for Jimi. Because he did so many things with it, physically, banging it around, without it really going out of tune, even though he used the wangbar a lot. It was indestructible, and it could stay in tune through everything. How many guitars could you say that of?"

STRATS ENTERTAINMENT

A couple of years after seeing Strats in the hands of Hendrix and Winwood, Clapton went about obtaining one of his own. "This is a true story: I was in Nashville, visiting GTR, in 1969. You remember GTR, George Gruhn's shop?" he asks. "Well, there was also a shop there called Sho-Bud, and they had a pile of old Strats in the back. They were so unfashionable that they were all going for like $100, $200 each, and I bought about 12 of them for virtually nothing because they couldn't get rid of them. I took them back to England, gave one to Pete Townshend, one to George Harrison, one to Steve Winwood, and I kept four back for myself and made one out of those four.

"That was the one, Blackie, that became my main instrument, and I played it for a long, long time. Now it's kind of worn out. They've tried many times in the last couple

"STRATS WERE SO UNFASHIONABLE THAT THEY WERE GOING FOR LIKE $100 EACH, SO I BOUGHT 12 OF THEM"

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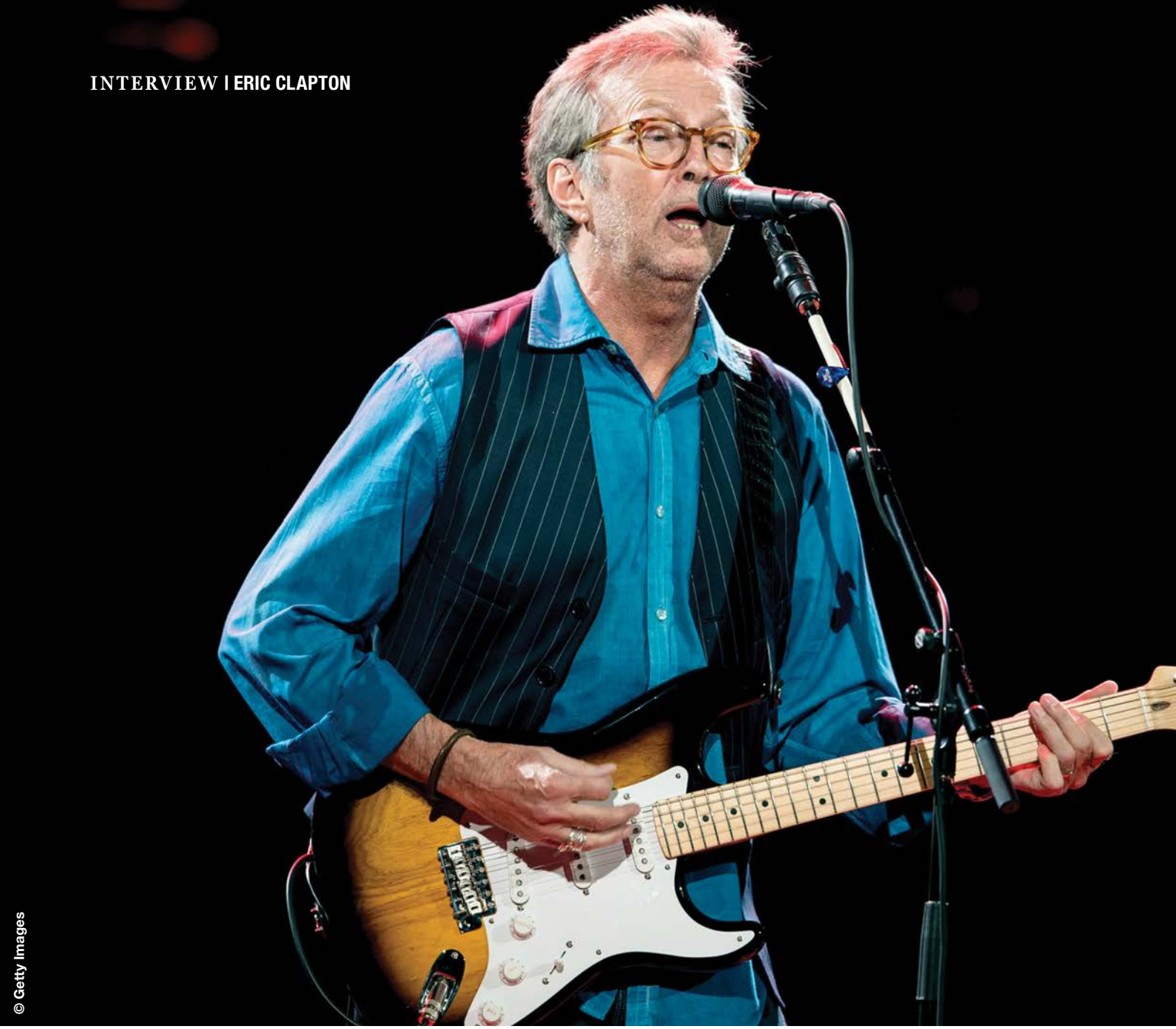

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of years to restore the neck, but there's just not enough wood left to do anything with. It's worn down the back and down the sides so you can't put frets in anymore, it's just not wide enough."

Following Blackie's demise, Clapton enlisted the help of the Fender Custom Shop to build a new model. Faced with a blank sheet of paper, Clapton concluded that his signature model should in most respects mimic the guitar he'd just laid to rest.

"When I first started negotiating with Fender for the signature guitar, they said to me, 'You can design it, you know. You can have it any shape you like.' But I don't know anyone who can come up with a better design. It hasn't changed in 40 years. That's the point – it's a guitar that can't be improved upon.

"The purist in me goes back to the fact that I want a guitar that looks like the first one, and the first ones had maple necks, and they were so simple... it just looks like a piece of wood stuck to a body. I always liked the idea that the body was kind of sophisticated and high-gloss and futuristic, and the neck looked like it had just been carved very quickly out of a piece or maple, and stuck on. There's a primitive side to it. With the rosewood neck it suddenly starts to look like a jazz guitar, or something – it doesn't have that rock 'n' roll or blues thing about it.

"But I did want to get away from the classic Strat sound. I had been playing a classic Strat for a long time. It's a very pure sound, the original Strat, and it's sometimes hard to get the sustain unless you're playing flat-out. But if you include my signature guitar and the original Strat you've got just about everything you need. Because on the one I helped design – or at least put suggestions into – they put on the midrange boost, which gives it a very fat resonance, and the possibility of sustain. It's virtually a kind of Les Paul sound"

Although the Clapton Signature Strat's mid-boost and the Lace Sensor pickups were the main departures from vintage, Eric's more recent signature Strat returns to tradition.

'I wanted to get back to the old, you know, wound pickups. So the new guitar is wired like Stevie Ray Vaughan's, with straightforward Texas overwound pickups. It's a much cleaner sound, and with this one you get the proper in-between sound, which is kind of like a banjo effect. There's no end to the variety of sounds that you can get.'

Clapton can still remember the first time he saw a guitarist lodge a Strat's selector switch in the 'in between' position. 'The first guy I ever saw do the out-of-phase thing was called Reggie Young. He was a

"I DON'T KNOW ANYONE WHO CAN COME UP WITH A BETTER DESIGN... IT'S A GUITAR THAT CAN'T BE IMPROVED UPON"

Nashville player, and he played on a lot of soul records, a lot of country records. I think his most accessible stuff is the Dobie Gray records, like *Drift Away*, but I met him when I was with the Yardbirds doing a package tour – the Ronettes package tour in 1964, I think. He came over with Bill Black's Combo, and he would sit on the bus and play guitar. I watched him on stage as well, and I think he was using that switch position."

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

For someone who's acknowledged as being at the peak of his profession, Clapton is keen to point out peers who have skills that continue to elude him. There's Johnny 'Guitar' Watson: "I've tried to play the way he does, with his fingers and thumb," Eric admits. "I'll be rehearsing and think, 'I've got it!' but when it comes to doing it on stage, my bottle goes." There's Robert Cray: "He must get sick of hearing me talk about him – he has more finesse in his little finger than I have in my whole body." And there's also Otis Rush: "Some of the best Strat playing out there is in his catalogue," Clapton says.

Don't believe the rumours that this man is more enthused about the label on a designer sweater than the sound of an old Chess record. He'll still cross an ocean to work with the likes of Nile Rodgers, who produced the fabulous *A Tribute To Curtis Mayfield* album with Eric covering a song, as well as Clapton's track on the *Stone Free* Hendrix tribute album from 1993.

"The thing with Nile is that I'd heard what be did with the Vaughan brothers' album [*Family Style*, 1990]," praises Clapton. "If it were not for Nile I would never have heard Stevie Ray, because he put Stevie Ray on *Let's Dance* with Bowie. I always wanted to meet up and work with Nile because of that. He understands the way music works on a broad spectrum – you know, black, white or whatever – and from the time I heard the Vaughan Brothers album which he produced, I knew I had to work with the guy. He's a dream to work with – very easy, very creative, lots of ideas.

"The Curtis Mayfield song is for an album to help alleviate his problems. He's suffering from paralysis after an accident on stage [Mayfield eventually sadly passed away in 1999 – Ed]. So the song I did is an old Impressions one called *You Must Believe Me*. Then I also did *Stone Free*, on the Hendrix album, with Nile. That song is very dear to me, because it's from when I knew Jimi. It's the B-side of his first single, and he played it for me, so it has a very personal reference."

KIDS MUSIC

Asked for a list of more modern rivals whom he admires, Clapton is for once short of ideas. Although he helped foster the likes of Stevie Ray Vaughan and Robert Cray, he has few suggestions for those who will follow in their wake.

"Coming up to date, to me most guitar playing's gone beyond the pale, in a sense. There's a lot of guitar players now that I don't necessarily identify with. I'm not very impressed with young musicians. That's just the nature of the beast – I never was. Even when I was growing up and when I was being influenced as a young musician myself, all of my heroes were already old men. I wasn't a teenybopper in terms of musical tastes – I liked Muddy Waters, Elmore James and Howlin' Wolf, and these were not kids. So I'm not, by and large, very interested in young rock 'n' roll musicians. But the ones that have come up and taken root, like Robert Cray, Bonnie Raitt, and obviously Stevie Ray Vaughan and Jimmie, they've kept the banner flying. And I know there are people out there who are young, who will go that way. But I think you have to have a fair amount of years under your belt before you can play with that kind of authority and experience.'

Whatever the record company pressures to come up with commercial releases, Clapton sees his future as being firmly rooted within the blues, a strict format which he believes allows him to remain true to himself. Now content to be labelled a guitar hero (in his new, more humorous phase he's even been known to waggishly enter his profession as 'legend' on his immigration forms), Clapton still sees the guitar as the most effective way of expressing his personality – and his gratitude to the instrument that has helped him to do this remains undiminished...

"I don't know if Leo Fender really had any idea of what he was on to, you know. I think the funny thing is that he just stumbled, almost accidentally, on a formula which cannot be improved upon. I've moved around with guitars and tried many different things, and I've always come back to the Stratocaster. The one I built myself, that I played until I wore out... what I got from that guitar, and I suppose it's what anyone can say about the Fender Stratocaster, is that I endowed it with me. It was an instrument that I could put my personality into, and it would stay there.

"Because the thing about these instruments is that they're almost like blank canvases. They're so simple. They're not like a Gretsch, although I'm not putting down Gretsch... but when I used a Gretsch it was so complicated, there were so many permutations of sound that I couldn't find a way in. With this guitar, I found a way in very quickly, and I stayed there. And that's what it's about.

"If you put three Stratocasters in a room, all identical, and one of them was my black guitar, I could have picked it up and it would have been able to play itself. I wouldn't have to put that much in, because there's already a lot of me in it. That's what the Strat gave me, in a way – it gave me access to myself."

– VINTAGE BENCH TEST –

1956 FENDER STRATOCASTER

This barely-played 50s Strat has the unblemished appearance of a modern guitar. However, as Huw Price finds, it plays and sounds like a vintage dream...

Originally given to The Music Guild in California by Fender as a promotional item, this Stratocaster was sold to its original owner for $331.71 in March 1956 and was virtually unplayed for the next 40 years. Besides a touch of wear on the edges of the neck and middle pickup covers, 'as new' would not be an unreasonable description. Opening the case, complete with all the original candy, really does feel like a spine-tingling, 'finding a time capsule' moment.

The neck is dated January '56, while the one-piece body has a label in the control cavity that's hand-signed 'Gloria' and dated Valentine's Day 1956. Lifting the scratchplate also reveals a hand-altered wire channel and factory-fresh wiring with all the original parts in situ and the spring claw grounded to the volume pot.

While researching early Strats for a '54 replica project, we learned that Fender tried three types of two-tone sunburst. This appears to be version two, with a yellow-stained centre section transitioning to dark brown edges.

Until 1956, Fender didn't cut and polish after the lacquer had cured. Instead, the bodies were sanded once sufficient coats had been applied and a few thin clear coats were then sprayed on top to bring up the gloss. It's clear this body was never polished out and the outer edges of the burst are crude with stray brown blobs in the yellow. To be honest, a gifted amateur would be able to match it.

In contrast, the neck does have a smooth gloss finish and the decal is in perfect condition. It looks as if a fine sealer coat was misted over the front of the headstock after the decal had been applied. The side dots measure 3/32 inches in diameter and the profile is a chunky C with a hint of V nearer the headstock.

KEY FEATURES

1956 FENDER STRATOCASTER

DESCRIPTION Solidbody electric guitar. Made in USA

SCALE LENGTH 650mm/25.5”

NECK WIDTH 42mm at nut, 51.5mm at 12th fret

NECK DEPTH 21mm at first fret, 22mm at 12th fret

STRING SPACING 33mm at nut, 55.5mm at bridge

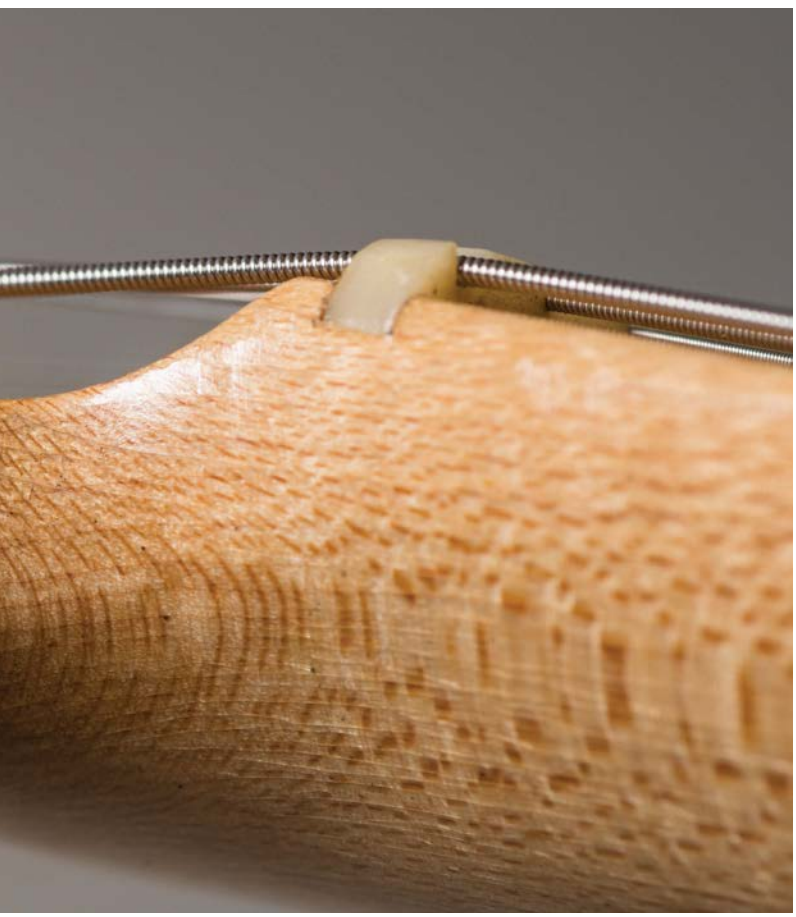
WEIGHT 3.44kg/7.58lbs

FINISH Two-tone burst

CONTACT
Lucky Fret Music
0207 729 9186
www.luckyfret.com

THIS This is the original factory nut and you can see how the string slots were 'V' shaped and very wide

BELOW You can gauge the depth of the neck by the way it transitions into the back of the headstock. Thinner vintage Fender necks would have wood carved away in the area behind the headstock to reduce neck depth at the first fret and there would be a curve rather than the straight line seen here



IN USE

It's often said that pristine vintage guitars are the ones nobody played because they weren't very good, and decades of playing are needed to make guitars really resonant. This unplayed '56 Stratocaster is in factory-fresh condition and it becomes clear that neither theory can be taken as gospel.

It's an odd sensation to play this Strat because it feels and sounds both old and new. Nothing on this guitar feels worn, so the no-line Kluson tuners operate smoothly and there's no slack. Every note rings out crisp and true, and to all intents and purposes it feels like playing a contemporary high-end Strat. However, the tiny frets and big neck do feel as if they're from another era.

The acoustic tone is very clear and airy. It has all the snappy brightness you would expect from an ash-bodied Strat with a big maple neck, but there's also plenty of woodiness and you can feel the whole body vibrating when you play chords. This is definitely a live one and it holds tuning superbly.

The intonation leaves something to be desired because it has probably never been adjusted. Although Fender went to the trouble of designing a bridge with six saddles that were individually adjustable for height and intonation, it seems it didn't do much in-house setup work.

Judging by the condition of the various screws, they haven't been touched by a screwdriver or allen key since this guitar left the factory. All six saddles line up like soldiers on parade and the string radius is almost flat. Maybe retailers were expected to perform setups according to customer preferences at the point of sale.

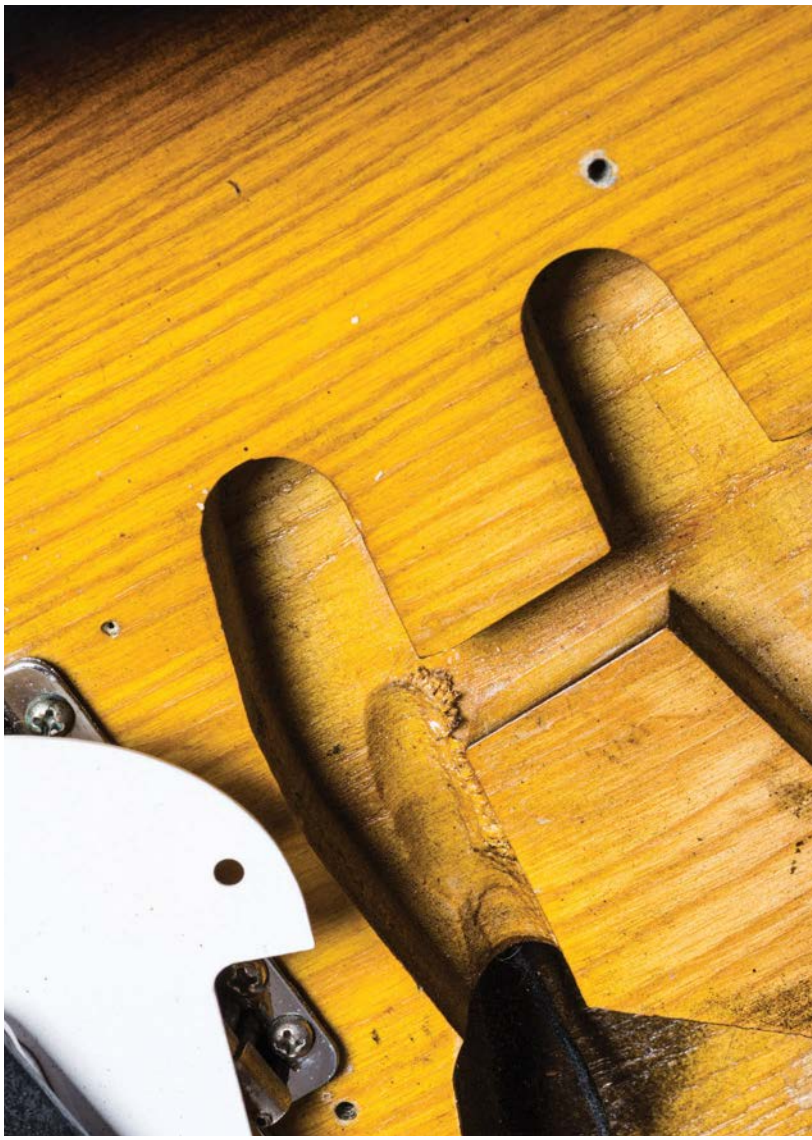
Even so, this guitar plays effortlessly with a set of modern 0.010-gauge strings and the bends feel really

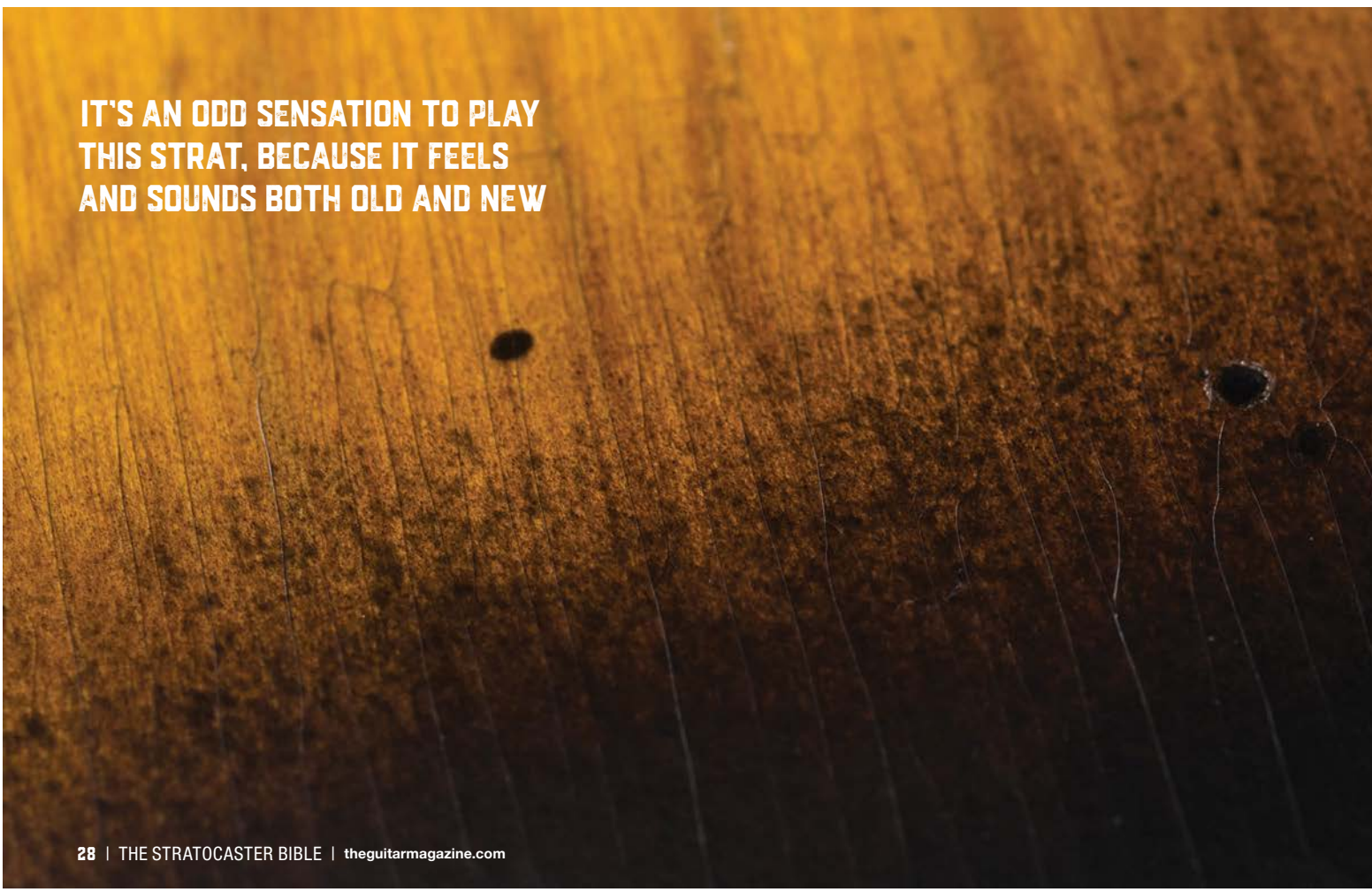
slinky. The action is extremely low but somehow it all works and there's no choke out or fret buzz. The neck tone control doesn't have much effect until it's rolled back past halfway. Below that, everything happens so fast it's almost like a switch. The middle tone control will need some cleaning up before it works properly, but judging by the neck control the potentiometers may not have a modern audio taper.

The earliest Strats had alnico III magnets, but Fender soon changed over to alnico V. The sprangy high-frequency response of these pickups leaves us in little doubt that they are loaded with alnico V slugs and, by any standards, this is a bright and wiry sounding Strat. So much for certain boutique pickup manufacturers' marketing spiel that 50s alnico V is equivalent to today's alnico III.

If you like glassy, crystal-clear Strats, this would be a dream guitar. Plugging in with your usual settings is unlikely to produce the best results because this '56 can sound a bit edgy and metallic through modern amps. Bear in mind this guitar was made in an era when guitarists often used heavier-gauge nickel strings with a wound G.

Fender amps from the early-to-mid 50s can sound quite dark in comparison to later amps. We try this guitar through a '51 Deluxe and it sounds just right with the amp's tone control set around





LEFT To avoid waste, no yellow stain was applied on the treble side of the pickup routs. Also check out the rough worm rout for the wires in the bridge pickup cavity

THIS The chamfered edges of the jacksocket hole show Gloria probably had to do some last-minute filing to get the plate to sit flat on the body

BOTTOM LEFT It took Fender a while to settle on a method for spraying sunburst finishes and in early '56 the company was still figuring it out. You can see a very grainy transition between the light and dark areas and there are plenty of big brown spots where they shouldn't be

MAIN IMAGE This label carries the signature of factory assembler Gloria Fuentes, dated Valentine's Day 1956

BOTTOM LEFT Was this the way Fender guitars left the factory in 1956? The saddles have not been adjusted for intonation

BOTTOM RIGHT Case candy doesn't get much better than this. In addition to the original vibrato arm and bridge cover, there's a pouch with original Fender celluloid picks, an unopened set of Fender strings, cable, polishing cloth and the original bill of sale

halfway. Normally, we play the amp with no treble roll-off, so it seems Fender guitars and amps of the same era really were designed to work together.

The skinny low frets aren't conducive to bluesy soloing, although the guitar's tone most certainly is. We find the '56 best for chord work because of its clarity and natural shimmer. Each pickup sounds distinct and the range of tones, from the woody neck to the snappy quack of the bridge, is wider than usual. Finding the in-between settings is a chore with the three-way switch, but it's worth the effort for the softer treble and transients.

At first glance, this Strat may appear and feel more like a mid-80s Japanese reissue than a genuine vintage instrument or even a Custom Shop concoction. However, the tone has way more depth, character and complexity. If you could live with the intonation, which isn't that bad, you could take this to a gig and be confident of a toneful and trouble-free night. It's one of the easiest-playing Strats we've ever encountered. In fact, it virtually plays itself.

Fender
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VOLUME
TONE
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Fender American Professional Stratocaster

It's out with the Standard and in with the Professional, as Fender overhauls its much-loved US workhorse version of the Stratocaster. Chris Vinnicombe goes Pro...

Towards the end of 2016, Fender's American Standard Series began to be heavily discounted at retailers, which could mean only one thing – new models were on the horizon. For 2017, Fender decided to rebrand the range entirely, and the current American Professional Series features a series of upgrades across the board, including new V-Mod pickups designed by in-house pickup guru Tim Shaw, treble-bleed circuits, a new 'Modern Deep-C' neck profile and impressive Elite moulded hardshell cases with TSA (Transportation Security Administration) approved latches.

"NOTHING ABOUT AMERICAN STANDARD AS A CONCEPT WAS 'BROKEN', BUT WE KNEW IT COULD BE BETTER" TIM SHAW

You'll see various other American Pro models, including modern takes on the Telecaster, Jaguar and Jazzmaster as part of the range, but here, our attention turns to the benchmark Stratocaster model. We spoke to Tim Shaw to get the skinny on the new V-Mod pickups. "Justin Norvell asked me to start working on the Strat and Tele pickups for the American Pro series a bit over a year ago," explains Shaw. "We'd refreshed American Vintage and transformed American Deluxe into American Elite, and for 2017, we'd planned to update the American Standard models. Our general concept was that of refinement; nothing about American Standard as a concept was 'broken', but we knew it could be better, even if the changes were subtle. With the pickups, there was a challenge to improve them without sacrificing the broad appeal they already enjoyed.

"I do pickup design for several brands within FMIC, and I'd been working with most of the commonly available alnico-magnet materials for various other projects. Each alnico alloy has its own tone due to the chemical composition of the magnets, and I decided to try mixing materials within individual pickups. While this has been done on a limited scale in the past, I felt that it would be possible – and interesting – to mix and voice the pickups and their magnets as systems. We have various magnet combinations for different musical purposes on the Teles and Strats, and on the basses as well. On the Strats, for instance, it's important to have each pickup sound good, but the unique character of positions two and four has to be preserved as well.

"So the neck pickup has alnico II for the wound strings and alnico III for the trebles. The middle pickup has alnico II for the basses and alnico V for the trebles, and the bridge pickup has alnico V all the way across. We also adjusted and voiced the magnet wire on the individual coils so that the whole set worked well as a system, and added a model-specific treble-bleed circuit as well. We voiced the treble-bleed circuits individually for each model in the American Pro Series, based on the pickup combinations."

KEY FEATURES

FENDER AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL STRATOCASTER

PRICE £1,399 (inc Elite hardshell case)

DESCRIPTION Double-cutaway, bolt-on neck electric. Made in USA

BUILD Alder body, 'Modern Deep C' maple neck with 9.5" radius rosewood fingerboard, 22 narrow tall frets, bone nut

HARDWARE 2-point Synchronized vibrato bridge with bent steel saddles and pop-in arm, Fender Standard cast/sealed staggered tuners

ELECTRICS 3x V-Mod single-coil Stratocaster pickups, 5-position blade pickup selector switch, master volume with treble-bleed circuit, neck tone, bridge/middle tone

SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/647mm

NECK WIDTH 42.4mm at nut, 51.4mm at 12th fret

NECK DEPTH 20.8mm at first fret, 24mm at 12th fret

STRING SPACING 34.6mm at nut, 52mm at bridge

WEIGHT 7.6lbs/3.4kg

FINISHES Sonic Gray (as reviewed), 3-Color Sunburst, Antique Olive, Black, Olympic White, Sienna Sunburst gloss polyurethane. Sienna Sunburst model features an ash body. Maple and rosewood fingerboard options available in all colours. Necks feature satin urethane finishes with gloss urethane headstock faces (rosewood and maple 'boards) and fingerboards (maple 'boards only)

CONTACT Fender EMEA
01342 331700
www.fender.com

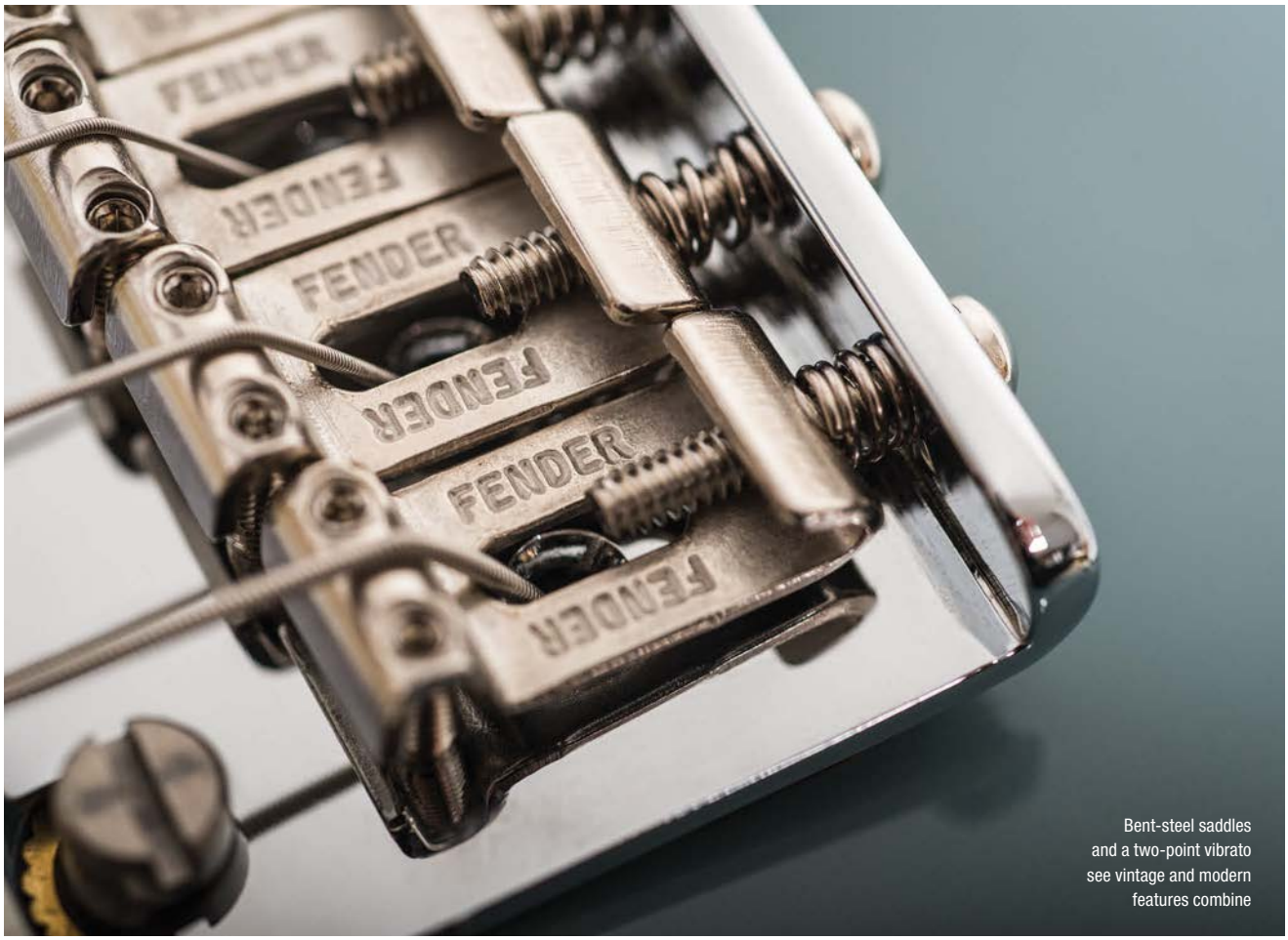
The rosewood slab 'board has an attractive grain and is a smooth, easy-playing surface with a 9.5-inch radius and 22 narrow tall frets equivalent to Dunlop's 6105 fretwire

The R&D process took place in California and Tennessee, as Shaw is a Nashville resident: "I asked my colleagues in Corona R&D to have sets of Strat pickups wound with the different magnet combinations I wanted to try," says Shaw. "I wound all the prototype Shawbucker sets here in Nashville and shipped them to Corona to be installed in the test guitars we used. I then flew out to Corona and we spent several days listening to a lot of guitars! This would also involve swapping pickups from one guitar to another to ensure that what we were hearing wasn't influenced by a particular instrument. Since we already knew most of the structural changes we were making in the series, we'd have these present on the test guitars so we could hear what they'd sound like in production. We also did A/B testing with American Standard models."

IN USE

Getting to grips with the Strat, it's immediately apparent that the level of construction is generally very high. That being said, while the Strat's plastics are neat, we struggle to align the bridge saddles to allow the high and low E strings to pass over the centre of the pole-pieces of the bridge and neck pickups simultaneously. We compromise with a set-up that sees the E strings pass over the inside edge of their respective neck pickup pole-pieces instead.

Neck-profile-wise, Fender's new 'Modern Deep-C' is actually a slim C profile that fills out a little as you approach the 12th fret. Aided by lightly rolled rosewood fingerboard edges, it quickly disappears in the hand, and we think it feels less generic and a little more considered than that of previous US Standard models. The 'board has a very attractive figure and the rosewood appears to be of high quality. Strapped on, it's a decent weight and displays promising levels of acoustic volume, sustain and resonance. Time to plug in...



Bent-steel saddles and a two-point vibrato see vintage and modern features combine

A smooth vibrato action (which returns to pitch perfectly even with the rather light 0.009-gauge supplied strings and a three-spring set-up) allows for dramatic, Jimi-esque histrionics – always a good initial sign with a Strat. In all five positions, the pickups are incredibly percussive and dynamic – it'll take a heavier set of strings to take the tone all the way down to Texas, but even as supplied, into a clean American valve amplifier, there's an explosive range of tones under your fingers from the outset that reminds you that in the present day, just as in 1954, there's no more expressive and lyrical platform available to a soloist than a good Stratocaster. Make no mistake – this is a good Stratocaster, and it's no slouch for rhythm either, whether you are chasing Jimi or Biffy Clyro tones, or almost anything in between in the wide-ranging musical kaleidoscope created by Strat players over the years.

Sure, this is a bright-sounding example, but turning our 6V6-powered combo up into overdrive proves that it's smooth and sophisticated, too, and not overly shrill or brittle. The treble-bleed circuit is well voiced, and once again, we find ourselves plugging directly into a tweedy combo with a smidgen of reverb and finding that a good guitar with a variety of great tones onboard (and a volume control that doesn't make things muddy when it's backed off) is all the pedalboard we need.

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

If the American Professional's upgraded specifications aren't a deal-breaker then we recommend checking out the used market for a recent Fender American Standard Strat – with Custom Shop pickups, these are no slouches tonally and, as Shaw suggests, far from 'broken'. Elsewhere, there isn't exactly a shortage of high-end Strat-inspired instruments with modern updates.

As reinventions go, American Professional is perhaps not the most dramatic we've ever seen, but there's definitely something about the considered combination of new features and well-chosen materials here that elevates this instrument from a 'standard' workhorse into slightly more luxurious territory. Pro tools indeed.

The Guitar Magazine VERDICT

+ Percussive, dynamic, everything a good Strat should be
+ Comfortable neck shape
+ Smooth vibrato action

– Difficult to align strings evenly across all three pickups

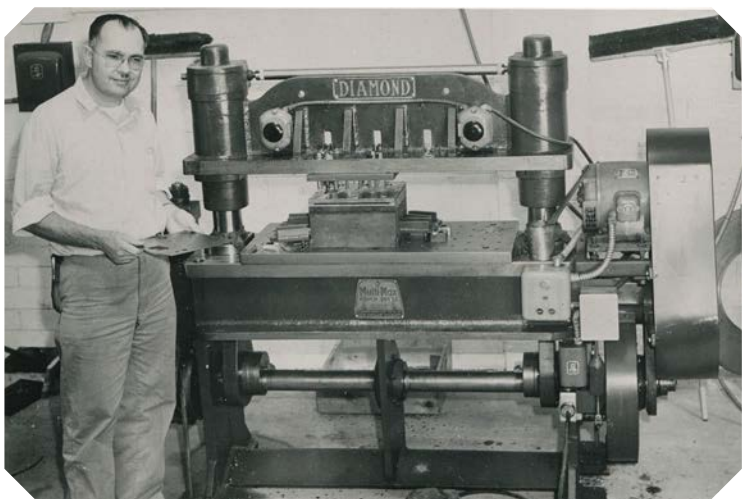
Professional by name, professional by nature. This is every inch a Stratocaster for the considered pro player

9/10

Fender
VOLUME
TONE
TONE

THE GENIUS *of the* Stratocaster

The Strat's futuristic curves disguised many clever features which were not only efficient to produce but also vastly enhanced the instrument for musicians. Huw Price explains just what makes the Stratocaster a different breed...



It has often been said that Leo Fender 'got it right the first time' with the Broadcaster model that came to be known as the Telecaster. Although Fender continued to manufacture the same guitar throughout Leo's career at the company, and beyond to today, Leo clearly felt there was considerable scope for improvement.

Then in 1954 Fender dropped the Stratocaster bomb on an unsuspecting guitar-playing public. Although still recognisably a Fender guitar, the design, functionality, hardware and electronics represented a very substantial evolution of the comparatively rudimentary Telecaster. It clearly wasn't in Leo Fender's nature to rest on his laurels and even more complex models soon appeared.

For some, the basic simplicity of the Telecaster makes it their Fender of choice. Various shoegazers, punk noiseniks and art-rockers have championed the more elaborate Jazzmaster and Jaguar. Yet the fact remains that the Stratocaster is the most popular, successful and copied electric guitar of all time. It has never been out of production, it has shifted more units than any other guitar, and in anybody's list of top guitarists past and present, the majority are likely to be Strat players.

Across the pages that follow we'll attempt to identify and evaluate the elements that make the Stratocaster the phenomenon it is and determine just why it has endured for over 60 years as an icon of rock 'n' roll.

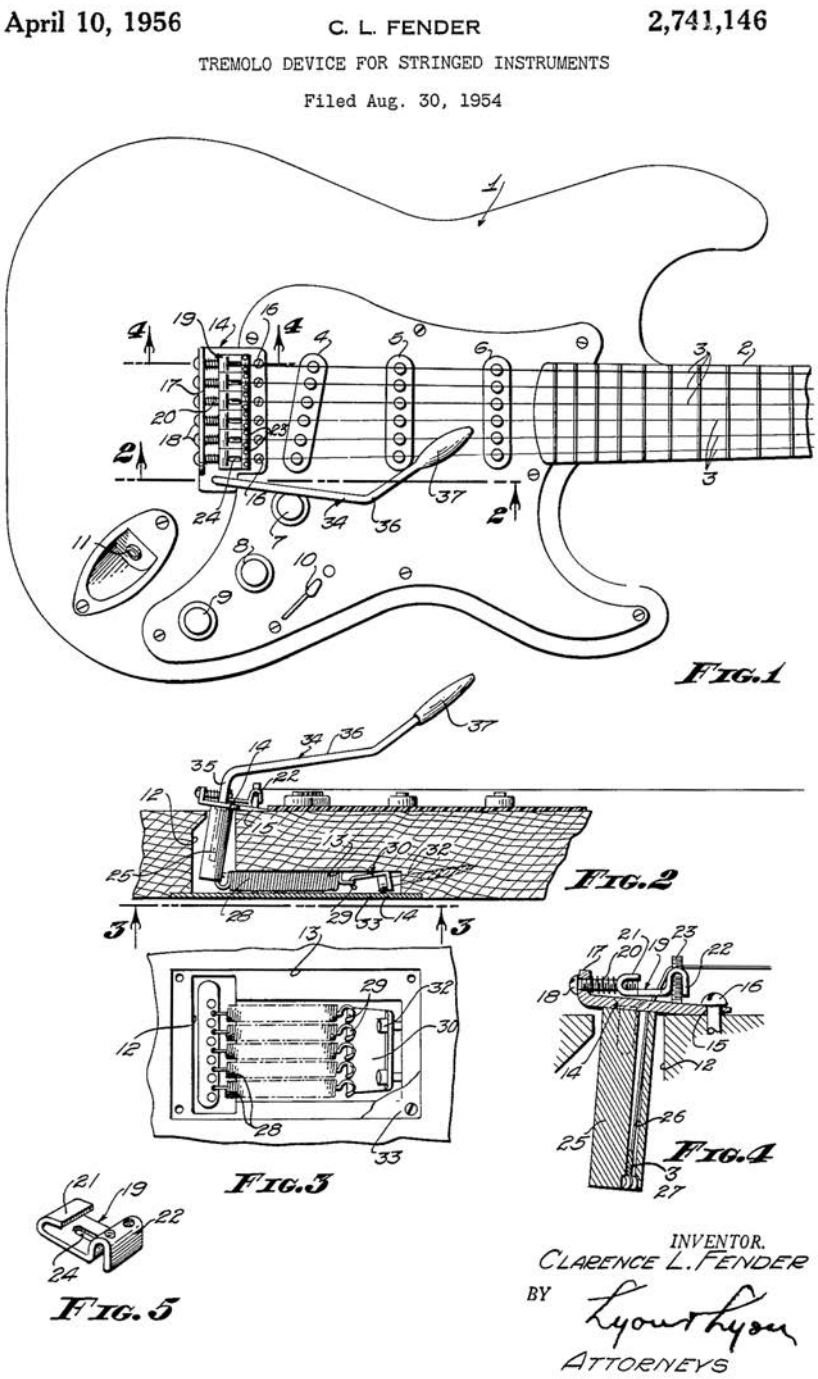
PRODUCTION CONCEPT

It's clear that Leo Fender took more inspiration from the auto giants of Detroit than from Orville Gibson or CF Martin when it came to manufacturing processes. He never set out to make guitars in the 'traditional' way, preferring instead to adopt modern mass-production methods using skilled factory workers rather than traditional luthiers.

This approach to manufacturing really took off during WW2. With most of America's working age male population fighting overseas, it was left to women to build the tanks, guns and battleships. Designers figured out how these things could be provided to factories and shipyards in 'kit form' and assembled by workers who hadn't acquired skills and expertise in the traditional way by serving long apprenticeships.

Take a look at early photos from the Fender factory, or view some of the cine camera footage Forrest White shot in 1959. Men may have done most of the heavy work, but there were plenty of women at Fender, too. The methods used to cut and shape the timber were not guitar-specific and would have been familiar to any professional woodworker or joiner.

Bafflingly, even today some people are still sniffy about Fender's 'flat pack' approach to guitar manufacture. Leo wasn't interested in any of the signifiers of high-end guitar building like decorative pearl inlays, intricate carving or multi-ply binding. The man was an engineer and entrepreneur who happened to like music, so his goal was to provide working musicians with practical and robust tools that sounded good and were easy to maintain and repair.


April 10, 1956 C. L. FENDER 2,741,146

TREMOLO DEVICE FOR STRINGED INSTRUMENTS

Filed Aug. 30, 1954

FIG. 1

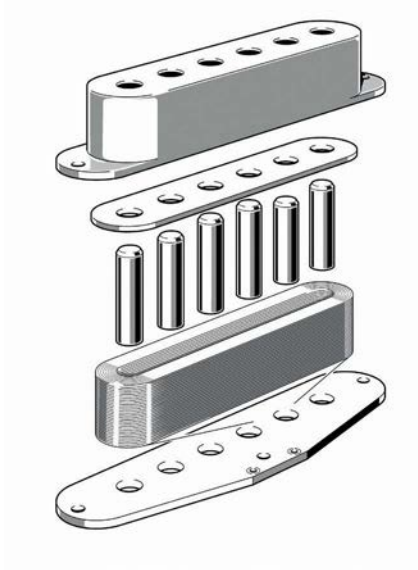
FIG. 2

FIG. 3

FIG. 4

FIG. 5

INVENTOR.
CLARENCE L. FENDER
BY Lyon & Lyon
ATTORNEYS



It's remarkable that Leo Fender managed to bring those ideas together so successfully to create something practical yet beautiful to behold. Conceptually and stylistically the Stratocaster was light years ahead of any other electric guitar of the era, and some would say that it still is.

BODY SHAPE

Two major factors determined the now familiar contoured body shape – balance and comfort. Leo Fender was aware that most gigging musicians wanted a guitar that would balance nicely on a strap without the neck swinging up or diving down. Feedback from players and dealers had indicated that the Telecaster body could be improved upon, and the elongated body horns of the 1951 Fender Precision bass were intended to shift the balance point. Through trial and error, Leo adapted the Precision shape for a six-string guitar and Bill Carson recalled going to work one morning to find four or five rough bodies that Leo himself had band-sawed.

These early bodies shared the same sharp edges as the Telecaster and Precision. As Leo Fender and Freddie Tavares recalled, things changed after a meeting with a guitarist called Rex Gallion. He asked, 'Why not get away from a body that is always digging into your ribs?' He reasoned that since a solidbody guitar requires no sound chamber, there's no necessity for it to have squared-off edges like an acoustic. Gallion's suggestion was inspired, but it seems likely that various individuals collaborated to arrive at the final shape. The edges were more rounded than the Telecaster's and the front contour combined with the 'tummy tuck' or 'rib

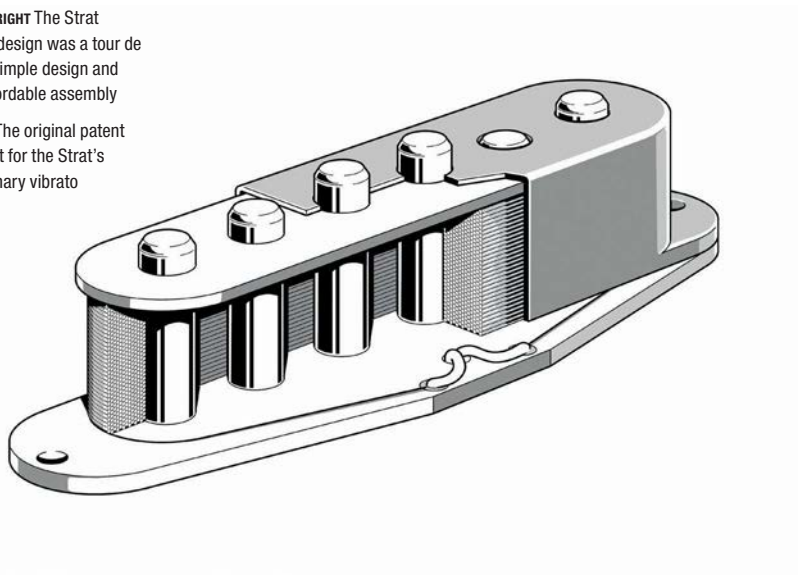
To achieve this he sought feedback and advice from musicians he respected and some, such as Bill Carson and Freddie Tavares, ended up working for him. Although Leo didn't always like what he was told, it's to the man's credit that he was open to advice. One example is Fender's grudging acceptance of the necessity for truss rods after it was explained to him that his early Broadcaster necks were unable to cope with extreme variations in temperature and humidity as they were toured all over the USA and Canada.

As a result of this, it's clear that the Stratocaster didn't simply appear out of nowhere. The vast majority of the features that we now associate with the Strat were adopted in response to repeated requests for extra comfort, a more ergonomic control layout and tonal versatility.

So often things designed by committee end up being a disastrous hotchpotch of compromises, conflicting ideas and lack of direction. The Stratocaster was revolutionary in many ways – aesthetically, ergonomically, mechanically and sonically.

LEFT AND RIGHT The Strat pickup's design was a tour de force of simple design and easy, affordable assembly

FAR LEFT The original patent document for the Strat's revolutionary vibrato



rout' (depending on how you hang it) made the Strat about as comfortable as a solidbody guitar could be. Crucially, it also gave the Strat a sleek, streamlined, space age look that retains a timeless beauty and grace. If a more elegant marriage of form and function exists in all of 20th century design, we have yet to see it.

THE SYNCHRONIZED TREMOLO

Leo Fender was surely aware of the distinction between tremolo and vibrato, so maybe it was his attempt to differentiate the Stratocaster's most revolutionary new feature from the ubiquitous Bigsby vibrato? Having done that, a few years later he was obliged to call the tremolo effect on Fender amplifiers 'vibrato'.

Some players had been retrofitting their Telecasters with Bigsbys, and the sales department began requesting a Fender guitar with a vibrato unit. By all accounts the development of the Strat's vibrato bridge was a protracted process and it provides clear evidence that Leo Fender didn't always 'get it right the first time'. Leo's first attempt was closer to the design that was later used for the Jazzmaster and Jaguar models, with the strings passing over the saddles to a vibrato unit behind the bridge. Leo obviously understood that reducing friction was crucial to maintaining stable tuning, so he devised saddles with individual rollers.

The idea was a good one, but the sound was not – as Bill Carson reported when he road-tested the Stratocaster prototype. Apparently vibration in the roller bearings caused a dramatic loss of sustain and made the guitar sound more like a banjo. Having spent six months in development and $5,000 on tooling, Leo wasn't best pleased, but thankfully his perfectionist's nature won out as he began re-designing the unit from the ground up.

The second version was based on a mechanical gram scale. Like the first version, it had springs to counteract the string tension, but the vibrato unit became an integral part of the bridge with the strings terminating in a metal block. The basic idea was that the bridge should float above the body and pivot against six retaining screws. The spring tension could be adjusted to alter the feel of the vibrato, and – unlike Bigsby's units – the Strat vibrato could raise as well as lower the pitch.

CONCEPTUALLY AND STYLISTICALLY THE STRATOCASTER WAS LIGHT YEARS AHEAD OF ANY OTHER ELECTRIC GUITAR OF THE ERA

A famous Strat prototype has emerged in recent years and it provides us with a snapshot of the development process. The body has a narrow spring cavity with just three parallel springs attached to the centre of the bridge block. The spring tree had yet to be devised, and the ends of the springs are hooked over the heads of wood screws that are driven into the back of the body.

Until 1971 the block and bridge plate were separate castings joined together by three screws. Much has been made of the original block, and many players retrofit their trems with 10-ounce cold-rolled steel blocks to improve tone and sustain.

In order to minimise friction, Leo countersunk the screw holes of the bridge plate to create a 'knife edge' at the pivot points. Fender's headstock design was also advantageous because it provided the strings with a straight run from the bridge to the tuners. Many have pointed out the similarity between the Leo's headstock shape and Paul Bigsby's earlier design, and

it's reported that the two men enjoyed a friendly relationship.

The bridge also featured six individual saddles. Leo had been aware that the Telecaster bridge design was less than ideal for accurate intonation, so this was a big step forward that set a new benchmark for all manufacturers. The Melita bridge used by Gretsch predated the Strat and provided intonation adjustment for individual strings, but Fender trumped that with individual height adjustment and a much more palm-friendly surface. In contrast, Gibson guitars were still equipped with carved rosewood bridges and metal wrapovers until the late 1950s.

One of the drawbacks of the Bigsby was that the arm restricted a player's access to controls and switches. In contrast the Strat's arm is set back from the volume control and when it's not in use it can swing clear of the switch and control knobs. The Fender vibrato has had detractors over the decades, but a properly-adjusted unit on a well set up guitar can be a smooth and stable operator.

At first players approached the Strat vibrato much as they would have used a Bigsby. It was more than a decade before Jimi Hendrix began to explore the design's full potential, but nobody has used it with more precision or finesse than Jeff Beck.

The vast majority of later vibrato systems from the likes of Floyd Rose and Kahler took Fender's design as a starting point. By the end of the 80s manufacturers such as PRS were moving things away from locking trems and were revisiting Leo's original concept with added refinements.

Modern vibrato systems are more likely to move against two pivot points located at either side of the bridge rather than six screws. There is also a far better understanding among guitar techs of the tuning stability issues caused by friction at the nut.

Given the parts and materials that were available to him, Leo Fender did a fantastic job on the Stratocaster vibrato. However he was always aware that improvements could me made and he continued to refine his design for G&L guitars. Even if there had never been a Strat and Fender had merely fitted his vibrato design to the existing Telecaster, it would still have been a pivotal moment in guitar development.

PICKUPS

Leo obviously wanted the Stratocaster to be regarded as an upgrade on the Telecaster, so the decision to equip the Stratocaster with three pickups was a big deal. Fender must have seen an opportunity, because his company was already buying three-position switches for the Telecaster.

Since the beginning Fender's approach to pickup manufacture had been somewhat different. While DeArmond, Bigsby and Gibson were making pickups with bespoke metal components, individually adjustable polepieces and complex plastic mouldings, Fender designed pickups using industry-standard parts and materials.

What could be simpler than six magnetic slugs, two eyelets and flats that could be stamped out of vulcanised fibreboard sheets within seconds? They even used the same type of fibreboard for amplifier circuit boards and for early Telecaster pickguards.

The Telecaster was equipped with two very different pickup units that created sonic contrast between the neck and bridge settings. The neck pickup was screwed directly onto the body, whereas the bridge pickup was suspended from the bridge plate. Adjusting the height of the neck pickup required the removal of the pickguard, and all the pickup wires had to be threaded through holes that drilled through the body to reach the controls.

The Stratocaster differed in several ways. Firstly all three pickups were identical, and both the metal inductance plate and metal cover were dispensed with altogether. Since pickups in the neck position tend to sound louder than those at the bridge, Fender made height adjustment simple by suspending the pickups from the Strat's scratchplate.

With a screw at each end of the pickup, players could balance the volume of the three pickups and fine tune their treble and bass responses individually. Many of Fender's contemporaries used pickups with

The Strat's easily adjustable pickups were a boon in an age when many guitars had little or no pickup adjustment at all

THIS IMAGE By mounting the controls and pickups to the scratchplate, Leo made the Strat much easier to assemble than other electric guitars

BELOW The Strat's lack of bridge tone control has been much maligned over the years, but it made sense for the music that Leo's clients were playing at the time the Strat was designed

little or no adjustment potential, and players had to rely on shims to balance things up.

The controls were also mounted on the scratchplate, which meant that the pickups and all the controls could be pre-mounted and wired up, then dropped into the body. Only two solder connections were required to install the whole assembly – the positive and negative leads from the volume control to the output jack.

Leo Fender clearly enjoyed designing and developing guitar pickups and he continued doing so throughout his career. Bill Carson recalls how Fender made several types of pickup for him to try out on the Stratocaster prototypes. Interestingly Leo Fender claimed to have pretty much completed the design for the pickups and the body during 1951.

He had experimented with coil width and height, impedance and polepiece diameter. The Telecaster pickups had flat polepieces that were flush with the top of the pickup. In an attempt to improve string-to-string balance Fender changed to staggered polepieces for the new Stratocaster pickups.

It obviously produced the desired results, because by 1955 staggered-pole pickups became standard on the Telecaster, too. The slug heights also changed over the years as Fender kept up with players' changing string preferences. The composition of the magnets also changed, but not through design – rather because Fender had to use whatever materials were available at the time.

The magnets were always alnico, which is an alloy of aluminium, nickel and cobalt, but there was a great demand for cobalt from the defence industry. Consequently, as the cobalt content of the magnets varied, so did the tone of the pickups. Strats from 1954 and 1955 are held to have a more airy, transparent and hi-fi quality and were generally fairly low-wind by today's standards, and it seems that Fender started off using alnico III.

Opinions differ on the makeup of alnico III but suffice to say, if it does contain any cobalt at all, it's a very low percentage indeed. From 1956 onwards it's generally assumed that Fender shifted over to using alnico V, and most replica pickup makers follow the same recipe book.

CONTROLS

The 1950s was an era when some guitar manufacturers were getting a bit carried away with electronics. For instance, the Epiphone Zephyr Regent had three pickups, two control knobs and a cumbersome array of six push-button switches, and by 1955 the Gibson ES-5 Switchmaster had individual volume and tone controls for all three pickup plus a four-way switch. In contrast Leo Fender had an aversion to what he saw as unnecessary features.

One of the criticisms of the Telecaster was that its pickup selector was badly positioned. The switch tip and the volume knob were too close together, and the square-on switch was placed at an inconvenient angle for quick adjustments. For the Stratocaster, Leo moved the switch away from the control knobs and re-aligned it to fall in the natural arc of a player's strumming arm. The volume control was also located for easy access and pedal steel-like volume swells.

In a sense three settings was the only option because, as Fender himself recalled, "It wasn't a matter of what we would like so much as it was a matter of what we could get to work with." Five-way switches simply didn't exist, and didn't become standard on Fender Strats until 1978. Had they been available it seems likely that Fender would have used them. In the interim many players opted for alternatives such as Memphis wiring or extra switches – much to Leo's dismay.

THE STRATOCASTER HAD THE BEST CONTROL LAYOUT FOR THE WESTERN SWING AND COUNTRY PLAYERS WHO WERE LEO'S MAIN CUSTOMERS AT THE TIME

Teles may be wired for neck/both/bridge these days, but up until late 1967 it was neck with pre-set bass roll-off, neck with tone control, and bridge. Leo clearly liked this arrangement, and having individual tone controls allowed the player to pre-set a treble roll-off on the neck or middle pickup on the Stratocaster. Leaving the bridge pickup without a tone control gave it a brightness that was closer to the sound of a Telecaster bridge pickup.

Many players liked the combined pickup tone that most two-pickup guitars provide in the middle position. Apparently Leo himself preferred the pure tone of individual pickups, which might explain why the original Telecasters and Stratocasters made no provision for this.

From the very start players were re-wiring their Broadcasters and Telecasters to ditch the bassy setting and get both pickups in parallel in the middle position. Naturally Strat players wanted this sound, too, and some discovered that they could get combined pickup sounds by carefully positioning the switch between the 'official' settings. Unfortunately this was tricky to do and it was all too easy to knock the switch out of place inadvertently while playing.

Electric bass guitars weren't even on the scene when Fender was devising the original wiring for his guitars. Although the Precision bass had been released in 1951, Fender would have been mindful that many combos of the era would have required a guitarist to cover the bass lines in lieu of a bassist. Hence the boomy 'mud settings'.

As the 1950s progressed, more bands acquired proper bass players so the 'mud setting' became surplus to requirements and guitarists could keep their tone controls wide open. At the same time amplifiers were getting brighter, so it became apparent that the Strat's bridge pickup was a little too bright. This has prompted many players to reassign the middle tone control or even swap out the bridge pickup for something beefier. Ultimately this would inspire the Superstrat... but that's another story.

Leo released the Stratocaster with what he considered to be the best control layout for the Western Swing and country players who were his main customers at the time, but before long the Strat was being used by blues, rock 'n' roll and surf musicians. Although music was changing rapidly, the Strat's wiring arrangement didn't. Maybe it should have, but by that time Leo was several projects down the line. The stock wiring never suited everybody, but the Strat provides almost endless scope for re-wiring, hot-rodding and customisation. Far from being a weakness, this has probably helped the Stratocaster to endure and adapt to so many playing styles and musical genres over the last 60 years, and its worth remembering that both current American Professional and Player Strats have bridge tone controls as standard.

CONCLUSION

People are often surprised to learn that Leo Fender wasn't a guitar player or a trained instrument maker. But consider this; would he have been such a brilliant guitar designer and innovator if he was?

The man wasn't inhibited by tradition or the conventions of craft. Although he didn't invent them, he was the first to grasp that quality solid-bodied guitars could be mass-produced. Leo also understood the only rule that mattered was putting the frets in the right place, because he approached guitar building an engineer's rather than a luthier's perspective.

Was the Stratocaster a work of genius? Leo Fender himself probably wouldn't have thought so. He preferred to look forward and apply lessons he'd learned to the creation of new products. Most likely he would have told you that the guitars he developed towards the end of his life were better than anything he produced during the 1950s – the Strat included.

Yes, besides the vibrato, some of the elements that made up the Stratocaster had already been seen in similar forms on earlier guitars. Although Leo's contributions were clearly the most significant, and he certainly assumed the role of project manager, several other individuals contributed crucial ideas. It was a team effort, with the likes of Freddie Tavares, Bill Carson, Don Randall and George Fullerton all contributing.

In essence the key features that made the Stratocaster special are its state of the art vibrato, a body shape that was both beautiful and comfortable, a wide tonal range, a well-considered control layout and the provision of individual string height and intonation adjustment. Perhaps the key to Leo Fender's success was his willingness to talk with players then figure out how to give them exactly what they wanted. With the Stratocaster, he delivered a guitar which ticked almost every box.

- VINTAGE BENCH TEST -

OLYMPIC FLAME

You might think that the idea of unearthing an all-original golden-era Fender that's been kept under a bed or in a closet for decades is pure fantasy. But they are still out there, as Huw Price's encounter with this 1963 Stratocaster proves...

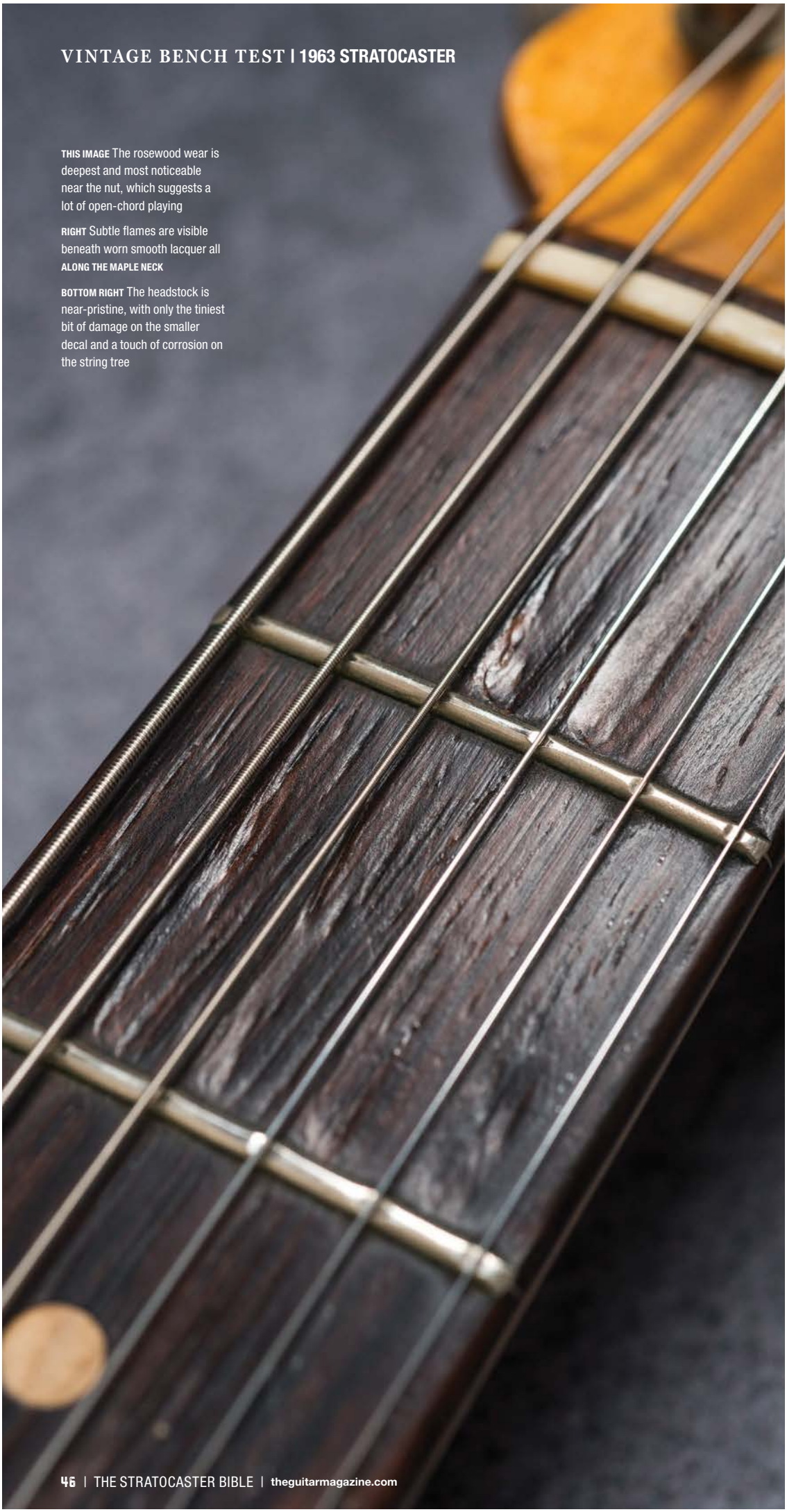
Most of us guitarists have heard tales of unsuspecting people inheriting droolsome vintage instruments by chance, but how often do we get the chance to find out if these hidden gems are actually as good as you'd imagine? You read the story of this particular guitar on p45, but the short version is that since rolling out of the Fender factory in Fullerton in 1963, this Olympic White Strat has had just two owners – it took early retirement in 1968 and has remained with the same family ever since.

VOLUME
TONE
TONE

THIS IMAGE The rosewood wear is deepest and most noticeable near the nut, which suggests a lot of open-chord playing

RIGHT Subtle flames are visible beneath worn smooth lacquer all **ALONG THE MAPLE NECK**

BOTTOM RIGHT The headstock is near-pristine, with only the tiniest bit of damage on the smaller decal and a touch of corrosion on the string tree



As befits a 1963 Stratocaster, the neck has a 'veneer' fingerboard of intensely dark Brazilian rosewood. We notice a hardened drop of something that has run down the side of the neck on the treble side of the neck pocket area and on close examination we think that the fingerboard has been varnished at some point.

There are some minor divots in the usual playing areas, which is quite commonly seen on vintage guitars. We rarely see this on even heavily played 10- or 20-year-old guitars, so we have to wonder if long fingernails were fashionable back in the 60s, or whether nail clippers were harder to come by. Either way, varnishing the 'board was probably done in an attempt to protect the wood, and we have seen it sufficient times to suggest that it was a common 'fix' during the era.

The almost pristine decal has three patent numbers, the single-line Kluson tuners are all in fine working condition and the neck lacquer has aged to a deep honey amber colour. With the factory frets still in place, it's interesting to note that the tang slots were sawn to almost the full depth of the rosewood. It's no wonder that after a couple of refrets, so many

KEY FEATURES

1963 FENDER STRATOCASTER

DESCRIPTION Solidbody electric guitar. Made in USA

BUILD Alder body with bolt–on maple neck, rosewood veneer fingerboard, clay dots and 21 frets

HARDWARE Kluson single-line tuners, vibrato tailpiece with Fender bent steel 'Patent Pending' saddles

ELECTRICS 3x single coils, master volume, 2x tone, 3-way switch

FINISH Olympic White

SCALE LENGTH 648mm/25.5"

NECK WIDTH 42mm at nut, 51mm at 12th fret

NECK DEPTH 20mm at first fret, 23.5mm at 12th fret

STRING SPACING 35.5mm at nut, 55.3mm at bridge

WEIGHT 3.6kg/7.93lbs

CONTACT ATB Guitars www.atbguitars.com

veneer-'board Strats of this era ended up with slots cut deeper into the maple, with the fingerboard itself being sanded in the process.

Strat necks got really skinny during the early 1960s, but by 1963 they were beginning to put on a little weight, and we think they are all the better for it. This one's a wonderful example with subtle flames, starting out fairly slim then gradually filling out before acquiring real heft from the seventh fret onwards. Although there is some play wear, the lacquer remains intact on the back of the neck. It's thinned somewhat and slightly paler in colour, with only one faintly grey area where the wood shows signs of oxidisation.

The alder body is in similarly fine condition, with a few dents and chips acquired during its short but intense gigging life. It looks like a cherished but un-pampered five-year-old guitar – which is essentially what it is. Fender's Olympic White was actually an acrylic and here it appears to be sprayed over a Desert Sand basecoat.

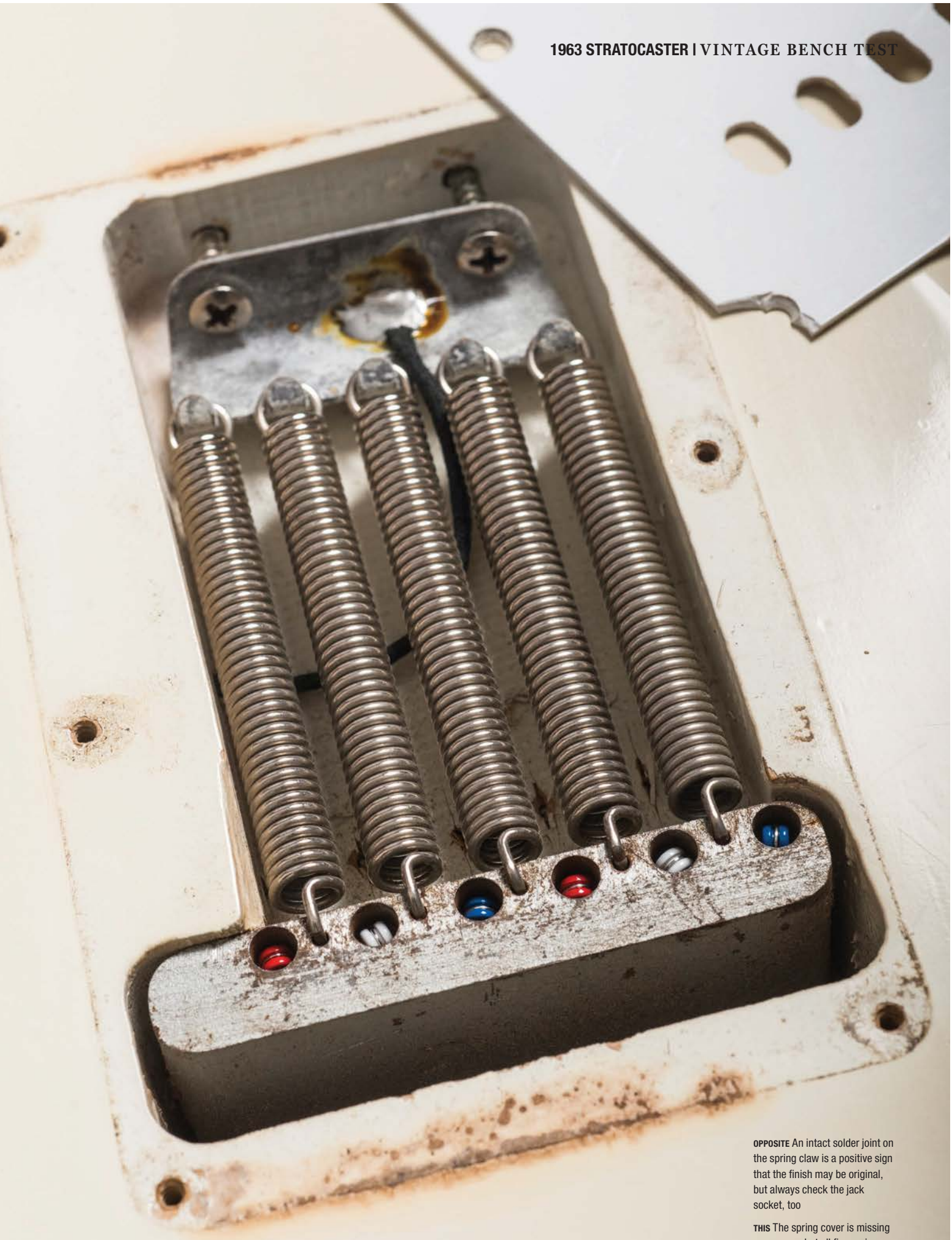
Fender usually sprayed nitro clear coats over the top and as the nitro aged, Olympic White Fenders turned creamy yellow. Those that retain their whiteness are the instruments that weren't oversprayed with nitro, and although this example hasn't yellowed to a significant degree, it's far whiter under the pickguard. We think it's clear nitro over acrylic, and that keeping it hidden away from sunlight for over five decades has surely helped preserve the original colour, and there's no checking to be seen.

Although it spent many years without any regular care and maintenance, the Strat arrives with bridge parts that are almost as clean as they were when they left the factory. The original bridge cover is still with

IT'S ONE OF THE CLEAREST SOUNDING VINTAGE STRATS WE HAVE EVER PLAYED

the guitar, and it probably remained fitted to the bridge when the guitar was used. Up close, we can see some minor pitting on the chrome-plated cover where a player's hand once rested.

We remove the neck to adjust relief before testing – probably for the first time judging by the pristine screws. A factory fitted shim is revealed, along with a neck date stamp reading May '63. The green celluloid pickguard is indisputably one of the best–preserved examples we have seen, with no cracks and barely any shrinkage. While the neck is off, we take the opportunity to peek underneath.



OPPOSITE An intact solder joint on the spring claw is a positive sign that the finish may be original, but always check the jack socket, too

THIS The spring cover is missing one corner, but all five springs are still fitted to the steel block

Soul Man

David Pontin began playing guitar in a band in 1965 when he was 17 years old. Formed in the Gwent valleys by a bunch of friends, they were known as The Shape Of Things and by 1966 they were gigging regularly with David playing mostly rhythm.

At the time David was playing a three-pickup Harmony double cutaway – possibly a H75 – through his Selmer Zodiac Twin combo. Former bandmate Gwyn Roberts remembers it sounded fabulous when he used his fuzzbox. The band changed direction and became The Midnight City Soul Band. There was a personnel shuffle, too, with the lead guitarist moving to saxophone and David combining lead and rhythm guitar duties. The second sax player in the band was at Cardiff University and he knew a cash-strapped fellow student who had a Fender Stratocaster he wanted to sell. According to Gwyn, David was "over the moon" when he bought the guitar for £50 in late summer 1967. By this time the band was gigging regularly, notching up 200 gigs in 1967 alone. Perhaps the high point for David was supporting Status Quo at Abergavenny Town Hall Ballroom on 16 March 1968, shortly after Pictures Of Matchstick Men had hit the charts. David met a girl at one of his gigs and

when they married in June 1968, he decided to quit the band. Rather than sell his guitar, David stashed it away in its Selmer case and it was variously kept it under the bed or in a cupboard. Even before he fell ill with the brain tumour that would confine him to a wheelchair in 1987, David would only occasionally get his guitar out for a quick play. Gwyn recalls that David was "a very good player with a nice touch that was ideal for soul music". Sadly, David passed away in 2014 and we are very grateful to the Pontin family for letting us feature his guitar.

Special thanks to Steve Pontin and Gwyn Roberts for helping us learn about this wonderful guitar's story.

THIS IMAGE All the original plastic parts are present and correct and the crack-free nitrate pickguard is among the cleanest examples we've seen

BELOW The aluminium shield plate remains fresh and shiny, with three original black-bottomed pickups that all still have their rubber tube spacers

Inside, we find a still shiny aluminium shield plate and pristine wiring. All the solder joints are original, the spring claw ground wire goes straight through to the output jack and the pickup wires are still bundled together with the original masking tape.

As expected we see a 0.1uF ceramic tone cap with a bright yellow insulation wire and the three-way switch is still intact. Having stiffened up to the point where it's hard to operate, a few drops of three-in-one oil soon free it up and the Strat's ready for testing.

IN USE

This Strat undermines two fondly held vintage guitar myths – namely that the clean ones weren't much good to begin with, and that even the best ones stop sounding good when left unplayed. With strong vibrations apparent all through the body, this is a 'live one' and even after half a century of inactivity, it plays very well. The 7.25-inch 'board radius doesn't preclude a low action and it feels fantastic for chord work, but a touch more fret height would help facilitate string bending and finger vibrato.

The unplugged tone is full and vibrant with impressive sustain, deep lows and an airy gloss in the treble. Through an amp it's one of the clearest sounding vintage Strats we have ever played, but the treble always remains complex and sweet rather than shrill.

The bridge pickup is a revelation, because it's Strat tone at its most springy and vibrant – pure

heaven through a Vox. The harmonics are so abundant, it's as if there's a built-in chorus. Over on the middle pickup, the trebles soften and the midrange asserts itself with a hint of quacky resonance. Often neglected even by dedicated Strat players, a middle pickup of this calibre reminds us that they are in many ways the pick of the bunch.

The neck setting produces the most vocal single notes and the woodiest lows. It's so sweet, expressive and downright pretty it's hard to credit it as the same Strat that dishes up the bridge tones described earlier. Each position – the in-betweeners included – is unusually distinct and you really couldn't ask for more from a vintage Stratocaster.

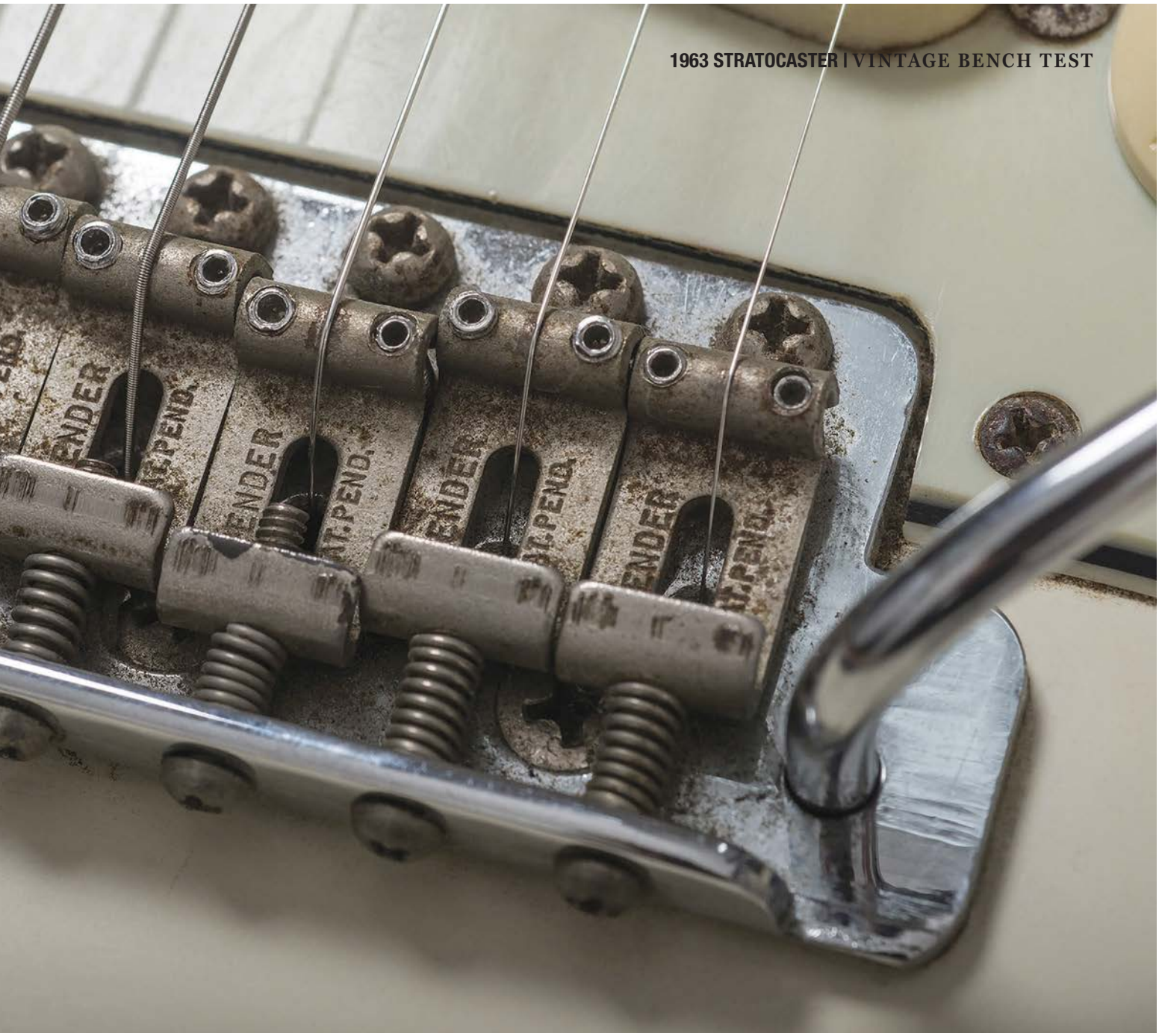
We have played brighter, fatter, louder and more wiry examples, but this Strat gives you something of everything. We all know what Strats sound like, but few are as complex, refined and nuanced as this. With some wear and flat spots, it is on the cusp of needing a refret and we think doing so would enhance it without negatively impacting its value. In all other regards, you'd struggle to find a better custom colour pre-CBS Strat with such solid provenance.

THIS IMAGE This guitar was probably played with the bridge cover installed, as there's little corrosion on the saddles, and the distinctive casting marks stand out

BOTTOM LEFT The guitar retains its red fibreboard shim and the shadow of the paint stick that Fender used to hold the bodies can be seen in the neck pocket

BELOW Protected from UV light by the neck plate, the original shade of Olympic White has survived intact

BOTTOM RIGHT A spacer nail hole that was used during finishing can be seen adjacent to the neck pocket and all the body routs are unaltered



Anyone Can Play Guitar

For over three decades, **Ed O'Brien** *has been the guitar glue in Radiohead. His knack for unusual sounds has remained a constant as the band have pushed boundaries, but now he's turned his attention to inspiring the next generation with a new Fender guitar – and it's definitely not a signature model...*

As we step into the London rehearsal studio where we'll be chatting to Ed O'Brien, the affable 49-year-old Radiohead guitarist utters a sentence that raises the stakes before we've even got our recorder out: "First things first, sit and have a go..." He gestures to a stool in the middle of the room where, in pride of place next to his favoured Fender Vibro-King amp and an imposing pedalboard, sits the reason we're here today – the brand new Fender EOB Sustainer Stratocaster.

O'Brien is clearly excited to see four years of work finally come to fruition... but we've all been in that situation when we're put on the spot and every bit of guitar skill we've ever had dribbles out of our ears. Now imagine that feeling when you have the 6'4 frame of a guitarist from the most influential British band of the last 20 years watching, waiting for your feedback... We just about manage to bash out some noodling, noting the guitar's reassuringly meaty neck and unconventional pickup layout before gratefully handing it back to a man who is much more qualified to handle such a unique instrument.

Firing up our voice recorder we sit down for something we're much more at ease with – talking nerdy about guitars, and one guitar in particular. The EOB Stratocaster is the first piece of signature Radiohead gear ever... well, we say signature, but from the off Ed is keen to point out that's not what this is:

"There's no signature on it. It's a co-design," he explains. "I had no plans to co-design an amp or a guitar or anything... I had a dream! I had a dream one night four years ago, I woke up and was just like, 'This guitar needs to be made'."

EVERYTHING IN ITS RIGHT PLACE

You can read our review of the EOB Strat on p58, but a quick look at the spec sheet confirms this isn't your average Strat – the mini-toggles where the jack socket would usually be, the humbucker in the bridge, and the Sustainer pickup in the neck position make this an unconventional proposition – but as much as this is a guitar that Ed takes on stage every night, the reason for its creation is less about him, and more about spreading the gospel of boundary-pushing electric guitar.

"I felt like this guitar had to come out," Ed reiterates. "I know that sounds a bit strange but I felt like it could be inspiring for a lot of guitarists. That's the only reason I wanted to do this – to see people use it. I'm hoping because of the price range, keeping it under a grand, it might be their first serious guitar. You could put it in the hands of some teenager and they're going to do extraordinary things with it and that's what I'm excited about – people expressing themselves."

In three decades of creating revolutionary soundscapes in Radiohead, Ed has used almost every classic guitar you can think of, but the Strat has been a constant bedrock, almost all the way back to the beginning.

"My second ever guitar was a Squier Strat," he recalls. "My first was a Westone Spectrum DX, and then a year later I got a Squier Strat. I had that until it got nicked in '95, so I played that on our first two records. It was affordable – it was £189, I couldn't afford a Fender Strat, but to me it was as good as... it could do the job!"

Generations of guitar players have been seduced by the Strat's timelessly futuristic lines, and Ed is no different. "It's a very feminine guitar – it's got lots of curves and edges," he enthuses. "Les Pauls and Teles are more masculine, and I love the femininity and the curves and the contours of the Strat. And obviously the sounds – three pickups with five different ways to use it... there's something very primal about that. It just sits in there right, and you play it and it's just like... yeah! In many ways I wish I didn't love such a perennial and quintessential guitar, but

I just do! I wish it could be some kind of Silvertone thing that I loved – and I do love Silvertones – but this is the thing that I love, I'm just drawn to it."

ALL I NEED

After his Squier Strat was stolen, Ed replaced it with a pair of Fender Eric Clapton Signature Strats – an unconventional choice given that his Squier was basically stock, and the EC model of the time sported Lace Sensor pickups and built-in active electronics, but as with his guitar style in general, O'Brien has never been one to obsess too much over vintage accuracy.

"I don't have that," he affirms. "I love people like Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughan and Jeff Beck... and they're extraordinary players, but I haven't venerated the equipment they used. I like old and new, and I try not to be snobby, because I think some people can be quite snobby about new gear. If it's good it's good, I don't care how old it is.

"So I loved the Lace Sensor pickups, they really worked. That whole era of grunge and stuff, they were fantastic guitars back then, because of the high output and the preamps – they sounded amazing with shitloads of distortion. They were great with effects as well – real clarity and focus. It cuts through doesn't it? And the extra bits you got with [the Clapton Strat]: I loved the preamp – I loved that! And I loved the EQ on it, too."

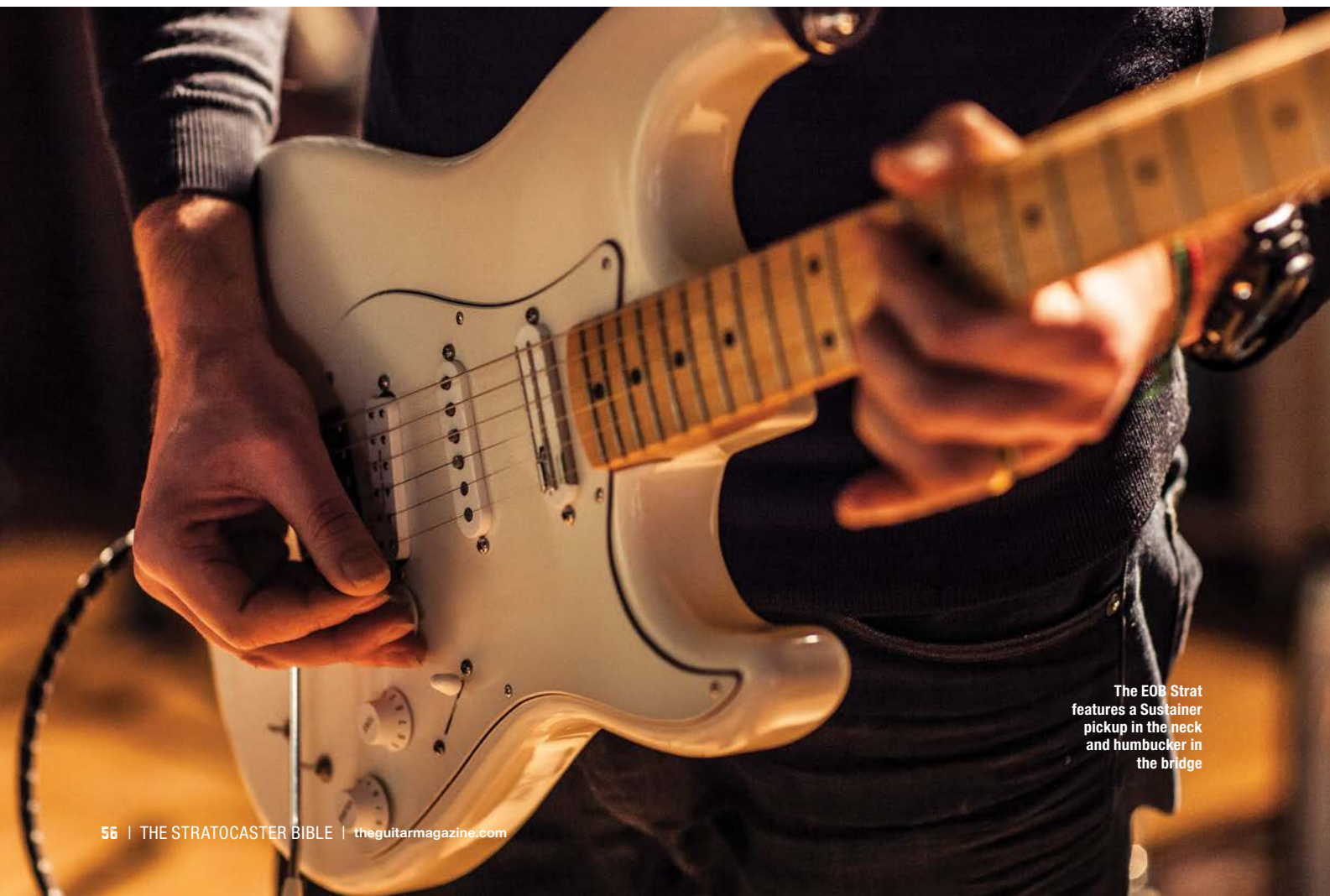
It was these EC Strats – which were heavily modded by Ed's original tech, Pete 'Plank' Clements, with Sustainer pickups among other things – that formed the basis for the EOB Stratocaster. If space and budget had allowed it would have been even closer. "When we started I wondered if we could get the preamp in here, too," he recalls. "But it was going to be too much. But the idea of having that in there was really tantalising."

The EC's active pickups also informed the pickups on the EOB guitar, leading to the unconventional pairing of a Seymour Duncan JB Jr in the bridge and a Texas Special in the middle position. "They're pretty high output – that's what I wanted them to be," Ed reveals. "I didn't want a low-output classic Strat sound – I wanted it to be more like the Lace Sensor, a bit more punchy. I play it a lot on the bridge pickup so I wanted something a bit fatter, and in the middle, the Texas Special sounded great because I wanted something in-between. It's got a bell-like quality to it. I kept on saying to Alex [Perez, the Fender Custom Shop designer who built the prototypes with Ed's input], 'There's a punch but a neutrality about a Lace Sensor' – almost like you don't feel like it's the sound of a Strat, and it works great with distortion and effects."

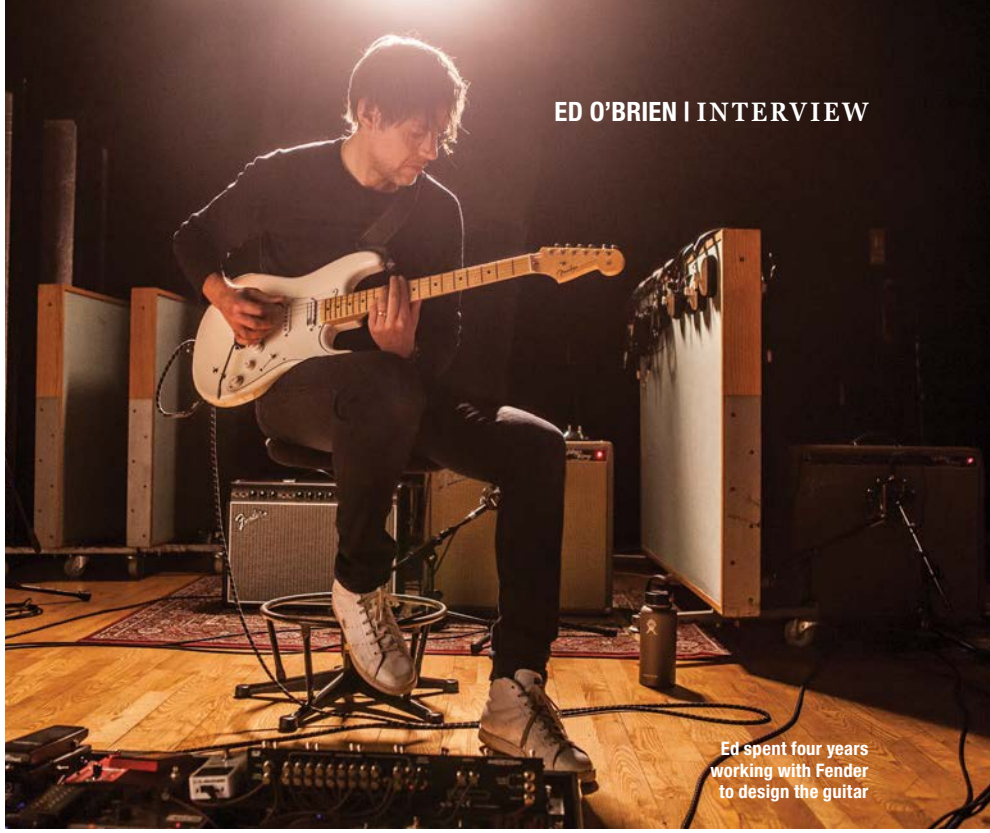
WHERE I END AND YOU BEGIN

Ed has been refining the EOB Sustainer Strat on the road, but as anyone who has followed the band's constant evolution over the last two decades will have noticed, he's had to adapt and expand the way he plays the instrument as they've pushed further into areas that are very far away from guitar-driven rock 'n' roll.

"There's no reverence for the guitar," he chuckles of his Radiohead bandmates. "I love the guitar, but it's not like you put a guitar on there for the sake of it. So a lot of what I've been trying to do in the last 10 years is make sounds that go against that. I have to prove myself – it's a good challenge! But there's definitely a bit of a stigma for the guitar!"



The EOB Strat features a Sustainer pickup in the neck and humbucker in the bridge


Ed spent four years working with Fender to design the guitar

This is reflected in the way the dynamic between Ed and his guitar collaborator Jonny Greenwood has changed, as the latter has moved away from the instrument to focus on orchestration and other avenues. "I love the guitar and I get my sounds from guitar, so that's where I do my exploring – through pedals and guitars and stuff like that," he explains. "Jonny, because he's got all the orchestration and the instruments, when he's searching for sounds he goes for other combinations – that's where he goes."

Ed and Jonny have rightly got plaudits for their influential and unique guitar playing over the years, but it's easy to forget that Yorke's playing was equally important, particularly in the early days of the band – in fact, when they were all friends in school, it was Thom who was leading the way.

"When we were at school Thom was the shit hot guitar player," Ed reveals. "He was really great. Neither Jonny nor I played. Thom is a great rhythm player – his acoustic playing is just phenomenal. All the stuff that he does with his fingers on *Reckoner* and stuff like that... And Jonny, obviously, he's known as a great guitarist, and he is – he's a great lead player, and again, a great fingerpicker."

LIKE SPINNING PLATES

Anyone who's played in a band with more than two guitarists in it will know how hard it is to make yourself relevant, and before Ed could get on with the business of selling over 30 million albums, he had to find his place in Radiohead's guitar triumvirate.

"My role on the first two albums was the choruses," he admits "Distortion, double up [parts] for a three-guitar assault... and then it was trying to find a place, much as a keyboard player in a band might do. Thom and Jonny used to write a lot together as well, so around the time of *The Bends* and *OK Computer* you'd come into rehearsal and the guitar part had basically been worked out. And the guitar parts weren't straight-ahead either – Thom's rhythm stuff certainly wasn't straight-ahead – they were really interesting inversions.

"But by that time my playing had got better and more confident, and what I was able to do was find space. Take *No Surprises* – Thom played that riff on an acoustic, and something about it reminded me of childhood – so I put the capo up on the 15th fret so that it sounds childlike, almost... and then the rest of the riff came from that, so once the sound came, that informed the part. It was about finding the right sound.

"I didn't really like our sound that much around *Pablo Honey*, I liked it in terms of it being aggressive and visceral – the gigs were great! But in the studio it was really fucking boring! But by the time *The Bends* came around, it started to get into the territory I'd always felt naturally aligned to – the sonics, the atmospheres and the space. I love space in music, I love not playing! When we did the first album literally everything was taken up, but by the time we did *OK Computer* there was a lot more space in the song – things were breathing, parts could weave in and out, and that's where I'm happiest. I love the aggressive thing, but not the whole time – you can punctuate and annunciate, it's like light and shade.

"For instance, *OK Computer* had a lot more piano and Rhodes – so one of Thom or Jonny would play keyboards, and then there was a lot more space. People know that the struggle with three guitarists in a band is, 'Well where do you find the space?!' So if you play different instrument it will create the space. And also... take a fucking rhythm guitar out of the song – often you don't need it! It's taking up a whole area of frequency. Like, Curtis Mayfield, brilliant – but we're not all Curtis Mayfield! Let the bass and the drums hold the rhythm down and bring in other stuff! So for me, taking out the rhythm guitar was a big thing and really helpful."

EXIT MUSIC

Being the guitar player in a band where the guitar isn't always leading the way in a conventional sense is in many ways the perfect background for someone to create a new guitar for a world where pop music and guitar don't always go together in general.

"It's not front and centre is it?" he chuckles. "But it's not in response to the current pop scene. The current scene... it is what it is. It's just literally putting it in the hands of people and to go, 'Have fun and see what noises and sounds you can make from this. And if you can make them musical and make them into a tune, brilliant, and if not... doesn't matter!' It could be used on soundtracks and have all sorts of applications.

"It's for other people – that's what I'm excited about. So colour wise, I was like, 'I really like white... what's the colour that sells the most?' 'White' Great! Because it looks great, but I want people to get this – because musically I think people are going to have a lot of fun with this, and I think they can do some really extraordinary things – that's what really interests me."

"WHEN WE WERE AT SCHOOL THOM WAS THE SHIT HOT GUITAR PLAYER. HE WAS REALLY GREAT. NEITHER JONNY NOR I PLAYED"

Fender EOB Sustainer Stratocaster

Radiohead star Ed O'Brien's collaboration with Fender is an intriguing mix of old and new. Chris Vinnicombe finds out if playing it makes you fitter, happier, more productive...

By colouring outside the lines, Radiohead have spent three decades creating works of desolate beauty more ambitious in scope than anything produced by their peers. Though it happens rarely these days, when the band's three nominal guitarists revert to type, their individual roles can be characterised thusly: Thom Yorke supplies the intricate rhythm parts, Jonny Greenwood the angular pyrotechnics and Ed O'Brien the widescreen ambience.

When it came to working with Fender to design the EOB Sustainer Stratocaster, O'Brien opted for a guitar that would play nicely with pedals and include an onboard Fernandes Sustainer circuit like the modified Clapton Strat that's been a live and studio staple in recent years.

Guitars with onboard sustainers are nothing new, of course, but the clever thing here is that Fender and O'Brien have taken the vast creative potential it offers and stuffed it into that most familiar of platforms – the Stratocaster. The Sustainer circuit is powered by a 9V battery and controlled by an on/off mini-toggle switch, while an additional three-way mini-toggle offers fundamental, harmonic and blend modes.

The more traditional aspects of the instrument are worthy of note, too. The satin urethane-finished 10/56 'V' neck offers a slice of high-end luxury rarely seen at this price point. The soft V rounds into a C shape en route to its upper reaches and it makes a nonsense of the notion that big necks are uncomfortable – it's addictive stuff and in combination with the 9.5-inch fingerboard radius and 21 Narrow Tall frets, playability is just about perfect.

IN USE

Before we engage the Sustainer, despite the non-standard pickup arrangement, there's an inherent 'Stratiness' through all five pickup positions. Head to the middle setting for the most authentic-sounding, vintage-style tones – if you are looking for Nile Rodgers and *Little Wing*, you can find them here. The JB Jr and Sustainer Driver are loud and clear and, along with the snap of a maple board, this helps ensure that parts retain definition amidst washes of delay and reverb.

The temptation with a Sustainer is to gravitate towards Ebow-style single-note lines and while this works very well indeed, even more interesting stuff starts to happen with chords and arpeggios. Try using a soft pick attack (the bloom of the sustaining notes creates a spacey reverse-style effect), volume swells, varying the intensity, stepping on a tremolo pedal to chop up the signal, adding crunchy tape echo repeats, using a looper to create synth-style pads... things can get as far out as you want them to.

How many of us are guilty of noodling around in the same old boxes every time we pick up the guitar? This instrument really can change the way you play and inspire you to take a fresh approach. As O'Brien himself says, "I want to be able to get one off the shelf and be able to play it and do a gig and stuff like that, but it's for other people – it's for them to do extraordinary things with, that's what I'm excited about. I think people are going to have a lot of fun with this." We couldn't agree more...

The Guitar Magazine AWARD CHOICE 9/10

The Guitar Magazine VERDICT

+ One of Fender's most playable necks, at any price point
+ Light weight and excellent build quality
+ An endlessly inspiring instrument

− The JB Jr can be rather brash

Fender's finest artist collaboration in years takes you far beyond your comfort zone while simultaneously feeling like home. A genuine triumph

9/10

KEY FEATURES

FENDER EOB SUSTAINER STRATOCASTER

PRICE £979 (inc gigbag)

DESCRIPTION Solidbody double-cutaway electric guitar. Made in Mexico

BUILD Alder body, bolt on 10/56 V-shaped maple neck, 9.5-inch fingerboard radius with 21 Narrow Tall frets. Synthetic bone nut

HARDWARE 6-saddle vintage-style vibrato bridge, vintage-style tuners

ELECTRICS Seymour Duncan JB Jr humbucker (bridge), Fender Texas Special single-coil (middle) and Fernandes Sustainer Driver (neck) pickups, 5-position blade selector switch, master volume, master tone, intensity control, Sustainer on/off mini toggle switch, 3-way Sustainer mode mini toggle switch (fundamental, harmonic, blend)

SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm

NECK WIDTH 41.6mm at nut, 51.7mm at 12th fret

NECK DEPTH 23.0mm at first fret, 24.5mm at 12th fret

STRING SPACING 34.7mm at nut, 54.9mm at bridge

WEIGHT 7.6lbs/3.4kg

FINISH Olympic White gloss polyurethane (body), satin urethane (neck) with gloss headstock fascia

CONTACT Fender EMEA
01342 331700
www.fender.com

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– VINTAGE BENCH TEST –

1963 FENDER STRATOCASTER

An original custom colour Sea Foam Green Strat is many a Fender collector's holy grail. Huw Price finds there's more to this guitar than just a rare finish

It's always a thrill to play any pre-CBS Stratocaster, but largely intact examples with an original finish present an even bigger treat. The fact that our subject for this bench test left the factory complete with a custom colour Foam Green paint job means we really are dealing with something very special.

Granted, custom colour Strats don't sound any better, but they do tend to command a premium with collectors and investors. Rarity counts, and Sea Foam (also referred to simply as Foam) Green is about as rare as it gets.

Try doing an image search for a vintage Strat with this finish, and all you'll turn up are some relics and a handful of re-fins. There are rumours that Rick Nielsen of Cheap Trick once owned an example, and Kirk Hammett appeared with one in Metallica's video for *I Disappear*, but... that's about it. This vintage lovely has a neck date of October 1963, along with a very early 'L' series serial number. The body has the later-style pickguard screw hole – shifted closer to the middle pickup – but the grounding is done in the earlier style, with the spring claw soldered directly to the output jack.

The wires are fairly short, so it's tricky to flip the pickguard over. Perhaps the famously frugal Leo Fender was cutting back on cable costs. As befits an unmolested vintage Fender, the cloth cable looks fresh and clean.

The originality of the finish is the crucial issue. We can report that the body is not branded or stamped to indicate that it's a factory refinish. A paint stick was used for spraying, and somebody applied masking tape diagonally in the neck pocket to ensure the factory 'OK' stamp wasn't painted over. Another strip tape was placed in the middle pickup rout, but there are no body markings in that area.

There's an earlier finish under the Foam Green, and it can only be sunburst. Some areas of green around the sides have rubbed away to reveal black lacquer. You can also see the layers all the way down to the wood where the finish is chipped, and it's telling that the black can be seen only towards the edges of the body.

Chips nearer the centre reveal clear coats with a yellow tint and traces of a reddish lacquer can be seen around the screw holes under the neck plate and inside the jack cavity. This does seem consistent with a three-tone sunburst.

There is no doubt that the Foam Green was professionally applied and it once looked pristine. Had it been applied over a worn and damaged sunburst finish, there is no way it would look as good as it does, and if the body had been sanded it's unlikely so much of the yellow would have survived. The lacquer retains much of its glossiness, but has acquired an attractive and natural patina consistent with playwear.

Amateur attempts to touch up the finish have been made in places and the repair paint is a decent colour match, but it was applied by brush rather than drop-filled. Under a black light, everything on this guitar looks right – except for the touch-ups.

It's well documented that Fender would spray over imperfect sunburst bodies to fulfil custom colour orders, in effect making the sunburst a base coat. Therefore close examination and gut instinct lead us to conclude that this Strat was Foam Green when it left the Fender factory.

Apparently, this one spent most of its life in New Zealand, and it has a very original feel. Even the 'ashtray' bridge cover and tremolo arm are still with the guitar. All the original plastics are present, too, and the pickguard is in pretty good nick, but it's split in the usual place north of the neck pickup screw. There has been a fair amount of shrinkage, which has pulled the pickups out of shape somewhat.

THIS IMAGE The neck date confirms this guitar was built in October 1963

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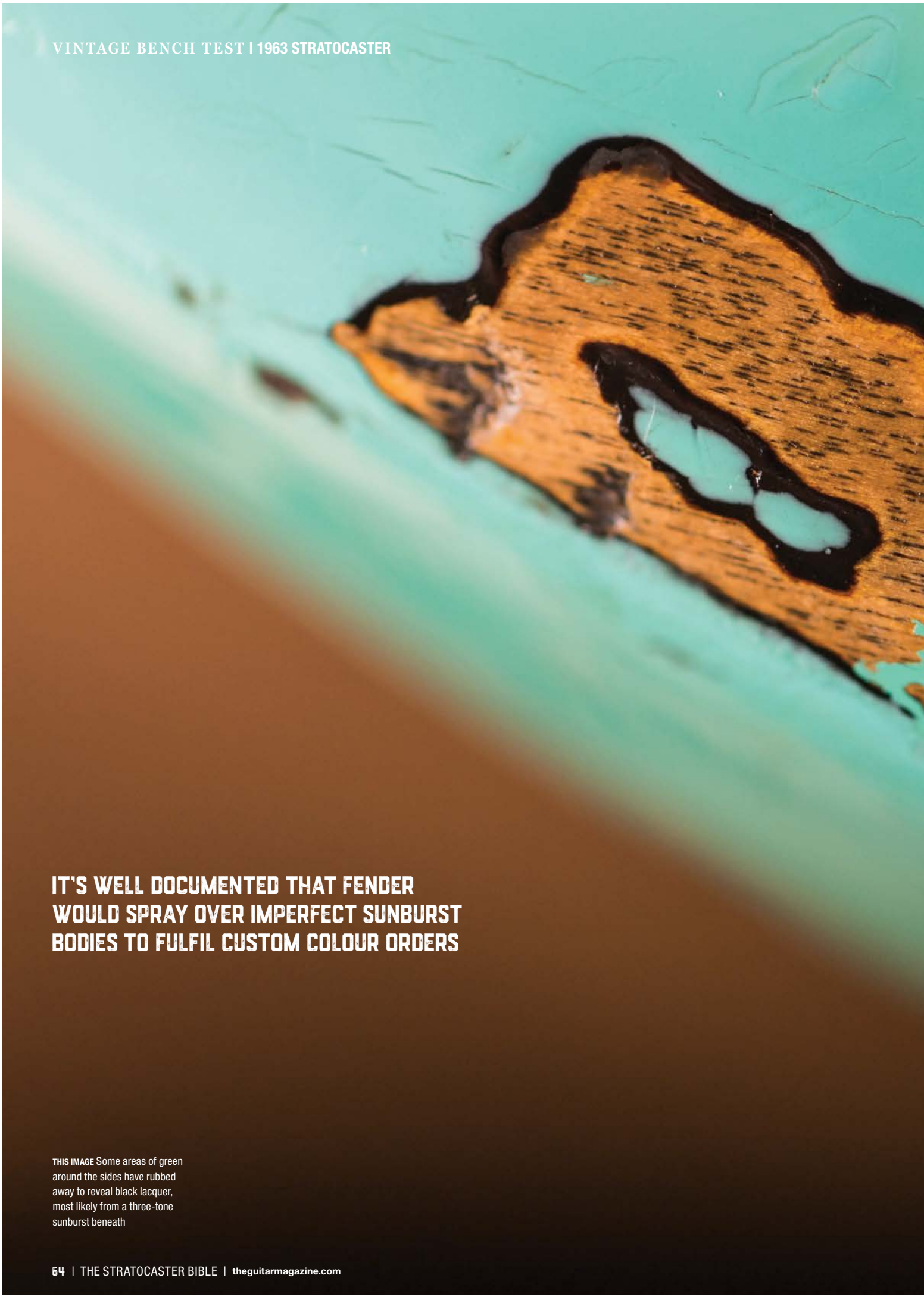


IT'S WELL DOCUMENTED THAT FENDER WOULD SPRAY OVER IMPERFECT SUNBURST BODIES TO FULFIL CUSTOM COLOUR ORDERS

THIS IMAGE Some areas of green around the sides have rubbed away to reveal black lacquer, most likely from a three-tone sunburst beneath

KEY FEATURES

1963 FENDER STRATOCASTER

SCALE LENGTH 650mm/25.5”

NECK WIDTH 42mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret

NECK DEPTH 20mm at first fret, 22mm at 12th fret

STRING SPACING 35.5mm at nut, 54.5mm at bridge

WEIGHT 3.65kg

FINISH Foam Green over sunburst

CONTACT Lucky Fret Music
0207 729 9186
www.luckyfret.com

CUSTOM COLOUR STRATS DON'T SOUND ANY BETTER, BUT RARITY COUNTS AND FOAM GREEN IS ABOUT AS RARE AS IT GETS

Looking underneath, the shield plate has been crudely reshaped at the end of the treble horn. This could be the the work of the previous owner, who may have been concerned that the plate was beginning to show due to guard shrinkage. The guard shows little evidence of truss-rod adjustments, and the scoop is rounded and smooth.

The frets have had to be recently replaced because the wear was so bad. The current owner chose jumbos, which are not original spec, but hey, if you're pulling out factory frets you may as well replace them with ones you like. Fortunately, the beautiful veneer board, with its lighter than usual Brazilian rosewood, retains most of its depth. The thickness of the veneer would originally have been about 3/32 inches.

Those who have played original early-60s Strats, or many of the reissues and replicas, may have a fairly clear idea of a typical neck profile for this era. Most likely, it would be something skinny around the first few frets, which thickens out to a palm filling roundness near the 12th fret. This neck feels nothing like that.

The fairly chunky neck has a full roundness all along, so the increase in depth is less noticeable as

TOP LEFT Original pre-CBS 'ashtray' bridge covers such as this have usually gone missing

THIS IMAGE All the original plastics are present, although the pickguard has split in the usual place by the neck pickup

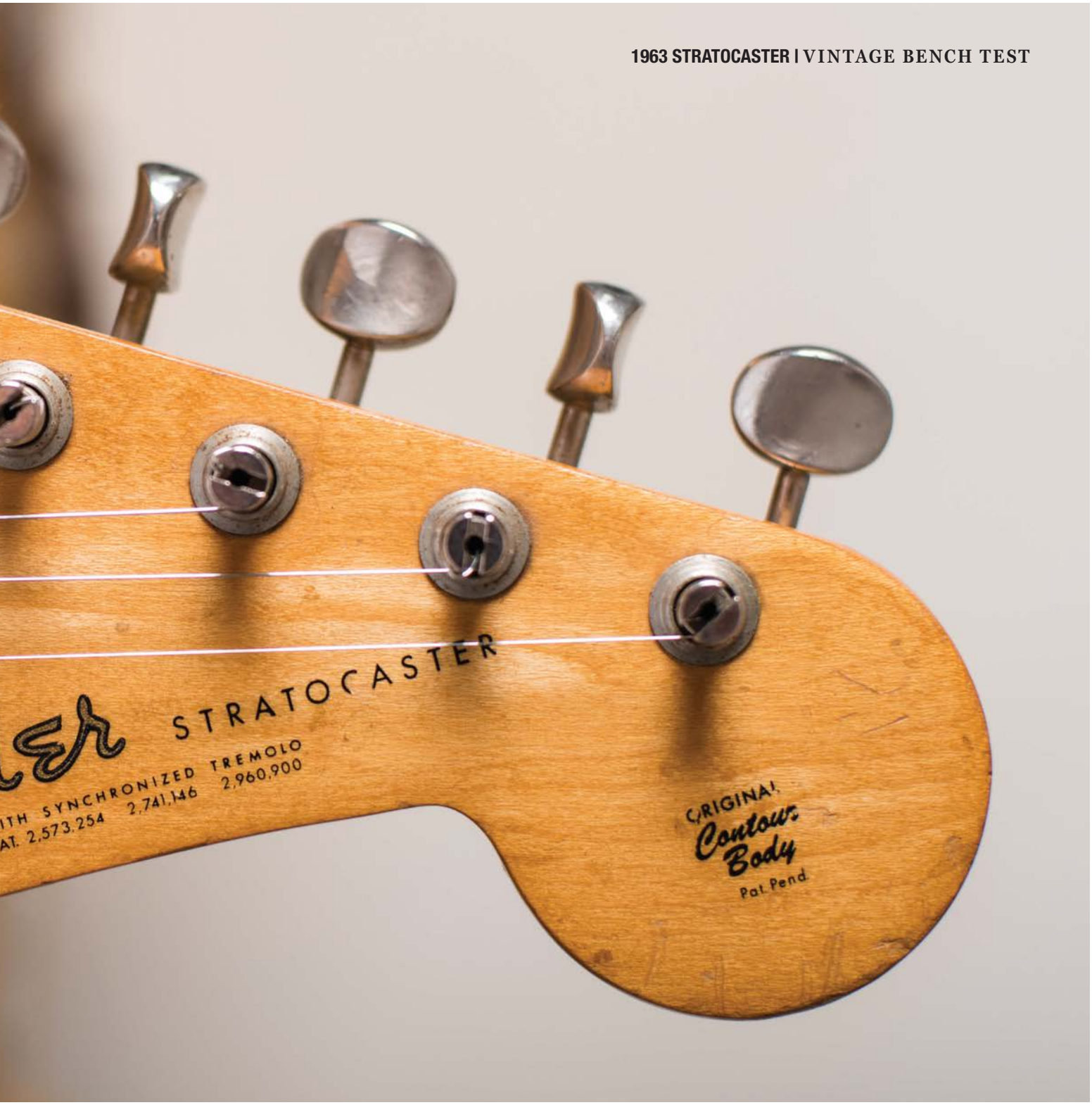
THIS IMAGE The headstock wears the Pre-CBS 'spaghetti' Fender logo

you move up towards the body. Acoustically, it's a fairly lively example, but there's nothing to hint at what happens when you plug it in.

This is one of the most naturally powerful vintage Strats we've ever played. The frequency range is extreme, with massive bass weight and sparkling yet smooth highs. It will push most valve amps into overdrive quite quickly, but here's the thing – none of the pickups is wound hotter than 5.8k. The bridge pickup is about as good as they get. It more than holds its own with the others, producing a spanky midrange with ample low-end weight. There's also a spectacular jangle on top that never veers towards excessive brightness.

The middle position is where it's at for rhythm duties, sounding well balanced with a throaty quack. The neck tone is absolutely huge, but as with both of the other pickups there's always inherent clarity, definition and punch regardless of overdrive levels.

Some 60s rosewood board Strats are associated with 'glassiness', but this one doesn't go there. This Strat is not only a collector's dream, it's also a muscular tone monster that does the big, clear, sustaining SRV thing to a tee.


STRATOCASTER
ORIGINAL
Contour
Body
Pat. Pend.

TONE
TONE
VOLUME

VOLUME
TONE
TONE

Fender American Original ’50s Stratocaster

Launched in early 2018, Fender’s American Original Series breaks with recent tradition and offers best-of-the-decade features rather than replicating specific model years. There are also some nods to modernity thrown in for good measure. Chris Vinnicombe gets his hands on the ’50s Stratocaster for an in-depth review…

The American Vintage Series was a sweet spot for Fender. Priced just about within reach of mere mortals, with classic stylings, dimensions and nitrocellulose finishes – if you couldn’t stretch to Custom Shop money, then American Vintage was where it was at for a pro-quality USA Fender with a golden-era look and feel.

2012 saw American Vintage get it last major overhaul, and the focus was on making ’em like they used to, with every curve, radius and neck profile reworked to bring the models closer than ever to the guitars that came out of Fullerton in the 15-or-so-year period during which it seemed that the company could almost do no wrong.

THINK OF THIS AMERICAN ORIGINAL STRAT AS A ‘BEST OF’ ALBUM COMBINING THE MOST POPULAR FEATURES FROM ITS GIVEN DECADE – IN THIS CASE, THE 50S

Wind the tape forward to 2018 and American Vintage is dead… long live American Original. Occupying the same position in the catalogue and with broadly similar pricing (happily, some models are even cheaper than their 2017 American Vintage equivalents), instead of zeroing in on a specific year of manufacture, the American Original Series cherry picks features from across a chosen decade and adds subtle but player-friendly updates such as 9.5-inch fingerboard radii and vintage-tall fretwire.

Although there are players out there for whom a 7.25-inch fretboard radius and an action with some fight is an essential part of the Fender experience, let’s leave machismo at the door along with our 0.013-gauge strings for a moment – a 9.5-inch ’board radius almost certainly has broader appeal without the playing surface being so flat that it no longer feels like a Fender.

Justin Norvell (Senior Vice President, Fender Products) reveals that this change was in direct response to feedback from players: “Although 7.25 inches is ‘vintage correct’, that spec is of an era of wound G strings, really heavy gauges and not much string bending. People just play differently now. We felt strongly (and got a lot of feedback) about making these instruments more playable or ‘fight back’ less. This again comes back to our goal – looking to make great instruments to play, rather than making things the old way ‘just because’.”

When you count up the various finish and neck permutations, plus lefties (of which there are two Strats to choose from) and basses, there are 30 different flavours of American Original spanning three decades. We’re looking at the 50s Stratocaster in Aztec Gold here: think of it as a ‘best of’

KEY FEATURES

FENDER AMERICAN ORIGINAL ’50S STRATOCASTER

PRICE £1,609 (inc hard case)

DESCRIPTION Double-cutaway solidbody electric. Made in USA

BUILD Alder body, bolt-on maple neck with 9.5" radius fingerboard, ‘Soft V’ profile and 21 vintage-tall frets, bone nut

HARDWARE Pure Vintage six-saddle Synchronized vibrato bridge, Pure Vintage Single Line ‘Fender Deluxe’ machineheads

ELECTRICS 3x Pure Vintage ’59 single-coil pickups, 5-way blade pickup selector switch, master volume, neck tone control, bridge/middle tone control

SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm

NECK WIDTH 42.0mm at nut, 51.0mm at 12th fret

NECK DEPTH 23.2mm at first fret, 25.6mm at 12th fret

STRING SPACING 35.1mm at nut, 53.6mm at bridge

WEIGHT 7.9lbs/3.6kg

FINISH Aztec Gold gloss nitrocellulose (as reviewed), 2-Color Sunburst, White Blonde (ash body)

LEFT-HANDERS Yes, White Blonde only, no upcharge

CONTACT Fender EMEA
01342 331700
www.fender.com

THE STRAT'S NECK IS A DELIGHT – IT'S A SLICE OF LUXURY WITHOUT THE CUSTOM SHOP PRICE TO MATCH

This American Original Strat is finished in glorious Aztec Gold nitrocellulose, so it'll age like an old guitar, too

compilation album that combines the most popular features from its given decade, but dispenses with the experimental sound collage on side four that everyone skips over anyway. With Relics now so commonplace, there's undeniably something a little 'new shoes' about strapping on such pristine instruments, but the nitrocellulose paintjobs (with a thin poly base coat for consistency) will soon begin to wear in the old-fashioned way, although the finishes appear to be a little more chip-resistant than the 'flash coat' lacquer on the 2012 models.

And what finishes – the vivid Aztec Gold metallic practically jumps out of the guitar case and plays the gig itself.

The Pure Vintage pickup set is carried over from the American Vintage Series, with our Strat equipped with a trio of '59s. "The work we did on the American Vintage Series involved deep tonal blueprinting of the right tones and materials, so there was nothing to improve there," says Norvell. "The choice was more, 'which set do we choose?' Keeping the pickups with that 100-per-cent vintage sound is a big part of what these are. We were careful with the things that keep the instrument 'true' – neck shapes, the lacquer finish and the pickups."

The neck profile here – a Soft V shape – is derived from analysis of vintage instruments. "We were able to find great examples of each era and nail the dimensions and feel," Norvell reveals. "The interesting thing about the vintage era is how different several examples could be, since they were all hand-cut and sanded all the way through – so there are okay ones, good ones, and great ones. The great thing about modern CNC technology is that we can make the 'great ones' extremely repeatable within very tight tolerances."

The body is nicely svelte, nestling in that happy weight zone between seven and eight pounds, while the plunging body contours are as comfortable today as they were 64 years ago and will still be 64 years hence. Alder bodies arrived in mid-1956 on Sunburst Stratocasters, but blonde models retained ash – our review model's body is alder, but should you want the ash-bodied '50s Stratocaster experience, then the White Blonde model is your go-to. Time to climb back out of the rabbit hole and plug in...

IN USE

When getting to grips with this American Original Stratocaster, there's no denying that the gloss nitro-finished maple 'board has a little more drag than an equivalent unfinished rosewood one. It takes a little getting used to, but the fretboard edges have been nicely broken before spraying and once again, the sheer ergonomics and comfort of this design – especially dressed in such a wonderfully rich metallic hue – remind us how jarringly futuristic this instrument must have seemed to players back in

As you'd expect from a vintage-vibed Strat, the American Original has a six-screw bridge with bent steel saddles

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Fender's Mexican-made Classic Series range offers a similar 'greatest hits' approach to features from the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and the guitars also have a 7.25-inch fingerboard radii for the purists. If you want a lacquer finish, too, then the Classic Series '50s Stratocaster Lacquer and '60s Stratocaster Lacquer offer excellent value for money. Both come highly recommended.

the 1950s. With a five-way switch and a rear tone control that rolls off highs on the bridge pickup as well as the middle, it's just about perfect.

With the tone controls wide open, the sounds are Stratocaster in excelsis, especially in positions two and four. Having a tone control on the bridge pickup is a real boon with overdrive – nowadays, it's such a common mod, but if you haven't used a Strat with this wiring before, try knocking the tone back on the bridge pickup into gain. It offers much smoother and more pleasant lead sounds, tames any scratchiness in the high end and offers an almost P-90-like growl when playing aggressive first-position rhythm parts and riffs. A comparison to an ash-bodied Custom Shop '56 model proves interesting – with our amp settings unchanged, the Custom Shop guitar is more explosive and woody, but the American Original has an angelic clarity. Despite the gulf in price, there's no winner or loser as such, it's just preference: the American Original's Knopfler to the Custom Shop instrument's SRV is perhaps the most apt comparison, although the review guitar's shimmering trebles retain definition superbly into swirling effects or a heavy fuzz.

With more of a Blackface-voiced amp and spring reverb, the American Original Strat's inherent clarity leads to many lost hours simply digging into bends and letting notes hang in the air. As supplied, the set-up is excellent, with the vibrato floating smoothly and returning to pitch accurately – there's also very little unwanted play in the arm. The neck is a delight, too – though its 25.6mm depth at the 12th fret appears hefty on paper, the comfortably rounded shoulders and subtle transition from V to C mean that it doesn't feel it. It's a slice of luxury without the Custom Shop price to match.

Whenever Fender reissues its classic designs, some observers will accuse the company of resting on its laurels, which ignores that fact that there's plenty of new ground being broken elsewhere in the catalogue. Like the American Vintage Series before it, American Original is about paying tribute to mid-century modern designs that still look and sound utterly contemporary. Some players will lament any departures from vintage spec, but most – this writer included – will find the 9.5-inch fingerboard radius and vintage-tall fretwire provides a 'best of both worlds' solution that's genuinely easier to play in higher registers, especially when bending strings. There might be 'no money up there', but there's a whole lotta fun.

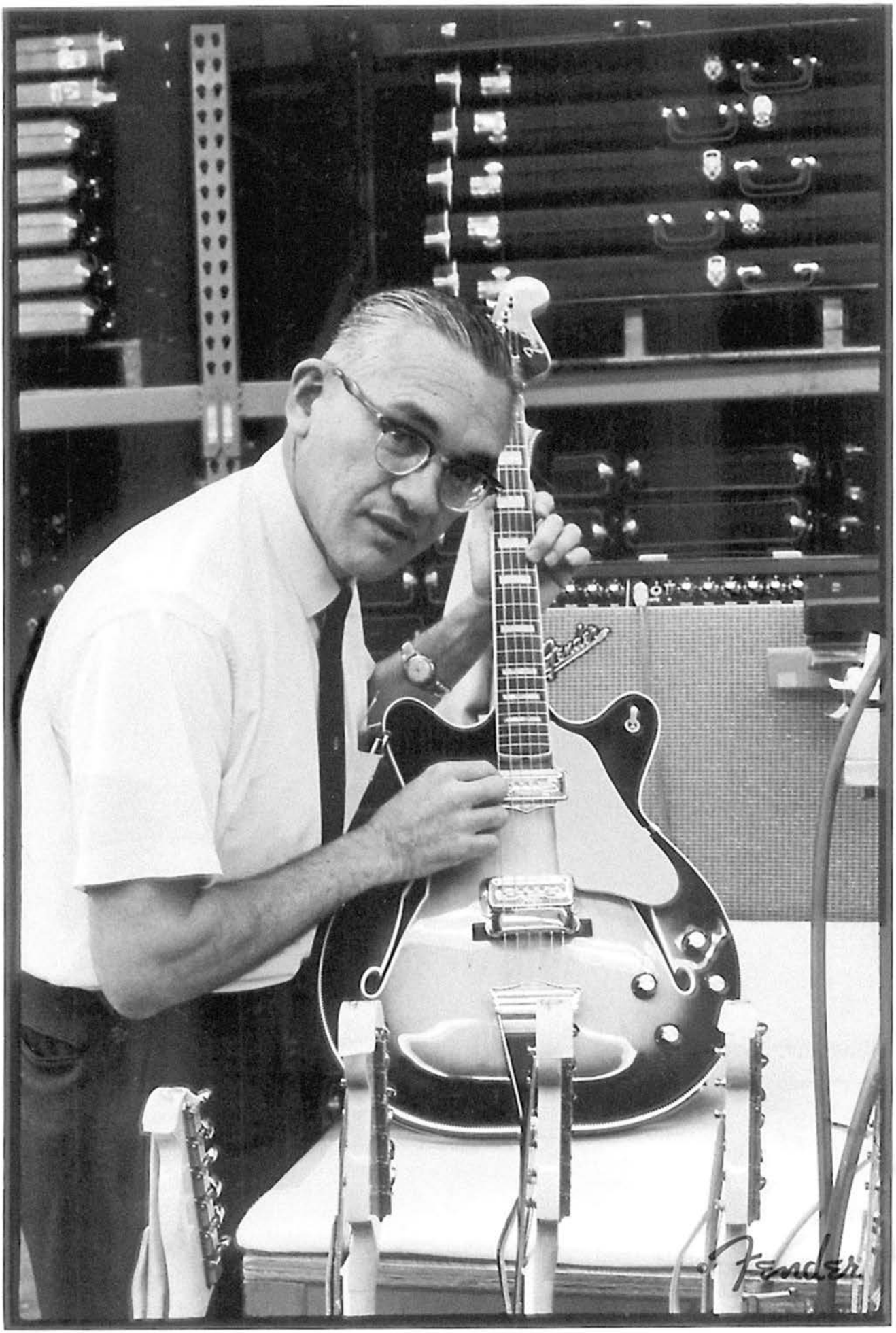
The Guitar Magazine VERDICT

+ Glorious looks, excellent build
+ Pricing is competitive and realistic
+ Impressive sounds and playability to match

− Some still prefer a 100 per cent vintage-accurate reissue

Offering the flavour of an era along with a smoother playing experience, the American Original nails all the right notes for fans of Fender's greatest hits

9/10


Fender

ALL ABOUT...

Freddie Tavarez

Musician, inventor, and a huge figure in Fender's history. Huw Price celebrates the life and times of Leo's greatest sideman...

Even if you've never heard of Freddie Tavares, you've almost certainly heard him. That was Freddie playing the iconic pedal-steel glissando at the start of the Looney Tunes theme tune in 1942, and he can also be heard strumming the ukulele on Elvis Presley's Blue Hawaii. But there was much more to him than that.

Freddie Tavares was a Hawaiian designer, engineer and talented multi-instrumentalist who also played for Bing Crosby, Dean Martin, The Andrews Sisters, Henry Mancini and Lawrence Welk among countless others. What's more, he was also a key figure behind the scenes at Fender across four decades.

MAN OF STEEL

Frederick Theodore Tavares was born on Maui Island, Hawaii, 18 February 1913. He began singing early on and when he was 12 years old, Freddie's eldest brother gave him a guitar. He clearly had natural ability because three years later he landed the rhythm guitar chair in Mary Kunewa's orchestra. Having finished school, Freddie moved to the more heavily populated island Oahu, playing guitar three nights per week in Larry Bellis' dance orchestra at the Alexander Young hotel. Soon after, Harry Owens offered Freddie the chance to play electric steel with the dance orchestra of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, Waikiki.

At the time, Freddie couldn't actually play the instrument that he would become most closely associated with, but Freddie told Owens, "I could easily learn to play one". Armed with the arrangements, it took Freddie less than two weeks to learn all the steel guitar parts.

Freddie stayed with The Royal Hawaiians for 13 years, playing prestigious venues all over America and recording for Decca, Columbia and Capitol Records. He was clearly keen on electric instruments from the beginning, starting with a Rickenbacker 'frying pan' and graduating to a six-string black and white Bakelite Rickenbacker steel as soon as the model was released in July 1935. Freddie's was the third one made and he played through amplifiers that he built himself.

Having grown tired of life as an itinerant musician, Freddie relocated his family to Anaheim, California in 1942. Seeking session work, Freddie's excellent sight reading ability and professionalism soon made him an in-demand player amongst movie score arrangers and record producers. Freddie also did a lot of radio and TV work.

In 1949 Freddie joined Wade Ray and his Ozark Mountain Boys on steel guitar, and began playing regularly at a club in Los Angeles called Cowtown. Over the next few years Freddie would write all the group's arrangements, build their amplifiers and even figure out a way to amplify Ray's violin. This facility with electronics led to a meeting with Leo Fender.

THE FATEFUL MEETING

By 1953 the Fender factory was running at full capacity and Leo Fender was getting a bit burned out. He needed an assistant, preferably a professional musician, who could provide technical feedback from a player's perspective. In March 1953, a mutual friend called Noel Boggs introduced the two men at Cowtown.

Freddie clearly wasn't a fan of Fender amps and after the show he spent some time telling Leo what he thought was wrong with them. Rather than take offence, Leo took a screwdriver out of his infamous

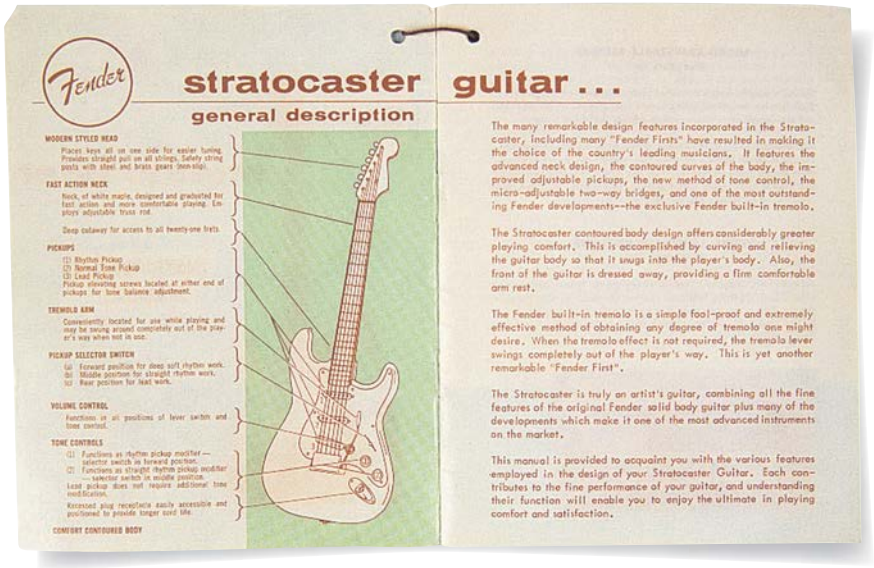
Fender
stratocaster
INSTRUCTION MANUAL
Fender
Fender Bassman
Marshall

leather pocket pouch and opened up Freddie's home-built amp on stage to check out how he had put it together. Leo was sufficiently impressed to offer Freddie a job as his assistant engineer.

Although Freddie was hired for his electronics expertise, at that time the Fender company was primarily focused on designing a new guitar to accompany the Telecaster. On Freddie's second day at Fender he began his "first real project... to put the Stratocaster on the drawing board".

Working with Leo, Bill Carson and guitarist Rex Gallion, Freddie helped to refine and finalise the shape and contours of the Stratocaster body. However, it is widely accepted that Freddie's most significant contribution to the Strat was his involvement with the design of the vibrato system.

Leo's first design attempt was much closer to the vibrato that ended up on the Jazzmaster and Jaguar. Although it functioned pretty well, its roller bridge saddles reduced sustain and it had the tonal qualities of a banjo. Having already spent six months on development and $5,000 on tooling, this must have been a bitter pill for Leo, but the forthright Freddie talked him around.


Fender

stratocaster guitar . . .

general description

MODERN STYLED HEAD

Places keys all on one side for easier tuning. Provides straight pull on all strings. Safety string posts with steel and brass gears (non-slip).

FAST ACTION NECK

Neck, of white maple, designed and graduated for fast action and more comfortable playing. Employs adjustable truss rod.

Deep cutaway for access to all twenty-one frets.

PICKUPS

(1) Rhythm Pickup
(2) Normal Tone Pickup
(3) Lead Pickup

Pickup elevating screws located at either end of pickups for tone balance adjustment.

TREMOLO ARM

Conveniently located for use while playing and may be swung around completely out of the player's way when not in use.

PICKUP SELECTOR SWITCH

(a) Forward position for deep soft rhythm work.
(b) Middle position for straight rhythm work.
(c) Rear position for lead work.

VOLUME CONTROL

Functions in all positions of lever switch and tone control.

TONE CONTROLS

(1) Functions as rhythm pickup modifier — selector switch in forward position.
(2) Functions as straight rhythm pickup modifier — selector switch in middle position.

Lead pickup does not require additional tone modification.

Recessed plug receptacle easily accessible and positioned to provide longer cord life.

CONTOURED CONTOURED BODY

The many remarkable design features incorporated in the Stratocaster, including many "Fender Firsts" have resulted in making it the choice of the country's leading musicians. It features the advanced neck design, the contoured curves of the body, the improved adjustable pickups, the new method of tone control, the micro-adjustable two-way bridges, and one of the most outstanding Fender developments--the exclusive Fender built-in tremolo.

The Stratocaster contoured body design offers considerably greater playing comfort. This is accomplished by curving and relieving the guitar body so that it snugs into the player's body. Also, the front of the guitar is dressed away, providing a firm comfortable arm rest.

The Fender built-in tremolo is a simple fool-proof and extremely effective method of obtaining any degree of tremolo one might desire. When the tremolo effect is not required, the tremolo lever swings completely out of the player's way. This is yet another remarkable "Fender First".

The Stratocaster is truly an artist's guitar, combining all the fine features of the original Fender solid body guitar plus many of the developments which make it one of the most advanced instruments on the market.

This manual is provided to acquaint you with the various features employed in the design of your Stratocaster Guitar. Each contributes to the fine performance of your guitar, and understanding their function will enable you to enjoy the ultimate in playing comfort and satisfaction.

influential of all Fender amplifiers. Having helped to create the quintessential American rock amp, it's ironic that Freddie disapproved of overdrive. In fact, it's probably what bugged him most about TV front tweeds back in 1953.

His son, Terry Tavares, recalls Freddie complaining, "I've put my integrity and heart into the design of Fender amps, and they produce crystal-clear sound. These snot-nosed three-chord wonders now want them to sound like $39.95 Sears catalogue amps. One of these days I'm going to design a 10,000-watt amp and not

FREDDIE'S FIRST REAL PROJECT AT FENDER WAS TO PUT THE STRATOCASTER ON THE DRAWING BOARD

Freddie realised that the bridge needed more mass, and he also advocated an integrated design based on a mechanical gram scale rather than one with a separate bridge. Freddie's redesign was so effective, it has remained a feature of Stratocasters ever since, and the basic design principle was adopted for all the locking trems that came after.

For Freddie, it was a flying start and he went on to play a significant part in the development of the Jazzmaster, Jaguar, Jazz Bass and Bass VI. Despite Leo reverting to his original vibrato design for the Jazzmaster, it seems that model was the design Freddie liked best because he retained one from the first batch of three prototypes as his personal guitar.

BACK TO AMPS

Freddie was also heavily involved in amplifier design while at Fender, and was pivotal in the development of the 4x10 Bassman – arguably the most iconic and tell them. When they turn the volume up to max and play their first chord, poof, they'll just disappear."

Freddie said that "all of the guitars were essentially Leo's design", and this natural self-effacement tallies with Dan Smith's recollection of Freddie as "the most humble man I have ever known". It's probably fair to say he didn't always get the credit or recognition he deserved, but Smith also described him as "outgoing by nature, funny and entertaining, articulate to a fault, continually in search of knowledge and unbelievably caring."

Others who worked closely with Freddie certainly did recognise his contribution to Fender's history. John Page, who once headed up Fender's Custom Shop, got his big break when Freddie recruited him as a design assistant in 1978.

"What a freakin' honour, 23 years old and I was made a guitar designer at Fender working side-by-side with Freddie Tavares. Freddie became like a father to me. He even called me his third son. He taught me the ins and outs of guitar design, told lots of stories, made me take vitamins, and told lots of really bad, old jokes. He would even do one-arm pushups when artists stopped by just to show them how spry he was. I loved him. What a great man".

Guitarist and Fender executive Bill Carson, who was one of Leo Fender's trusted consultants, said it all: "In my opinion, he was the greatest man in both musical talent and personal integrity that I ever worked with". Even so, by the early 1980s, the management had stopped listening to Freddie, and some within the company regarded him as little more than a symbolic figurehead.

LIFE AFTER FENDER

Freddie stayed musically active throughout his career, keeping up the session work, recording movie soundtracks and playing with his brother Eddie in The South Sea Islanders. He was also a founder and long serving treasurer of the Polynesian Society in California.

Following his retirement in 1985 Freddie stepped up his gigging schedule, playing mostly for older people in nursing and retirement homes. It's doubtful that any of them would have known that their entertainment was being provided by an inductee of the Fender Hall of Fame and the Steel Guitar Hall of Fame.

Referring to his mixed lineage, Freddie would proudly remark that, "the Portuguese makes me stubborn; Chinese makes me smart; English makes me high-class; Hawaiian gives me the music; Tahitian gives me the beat - I couldn't ask for more." Freddie died in Anaheim, California on 24 July 1990 at the age of 77 and he is buried in Nuuanu cemetery on Oahu.

VOLUME
TONE
TONE

– VINTAGE BENCH TEST –

1964 FENDER STRATOCASTER

If a played to death pre-CBS Strat is your fantasy guitar, this example from 1964 may be much as you have imagined it. Huw Price plays the dream...

By 1964, the Stratocaster was already a decade old and the design had undergone some significant changes since its inception shortly before the dawn of rock 'n' roll. This sunburst example was clearly played long and hard, yet somebody loved and respected the thing.

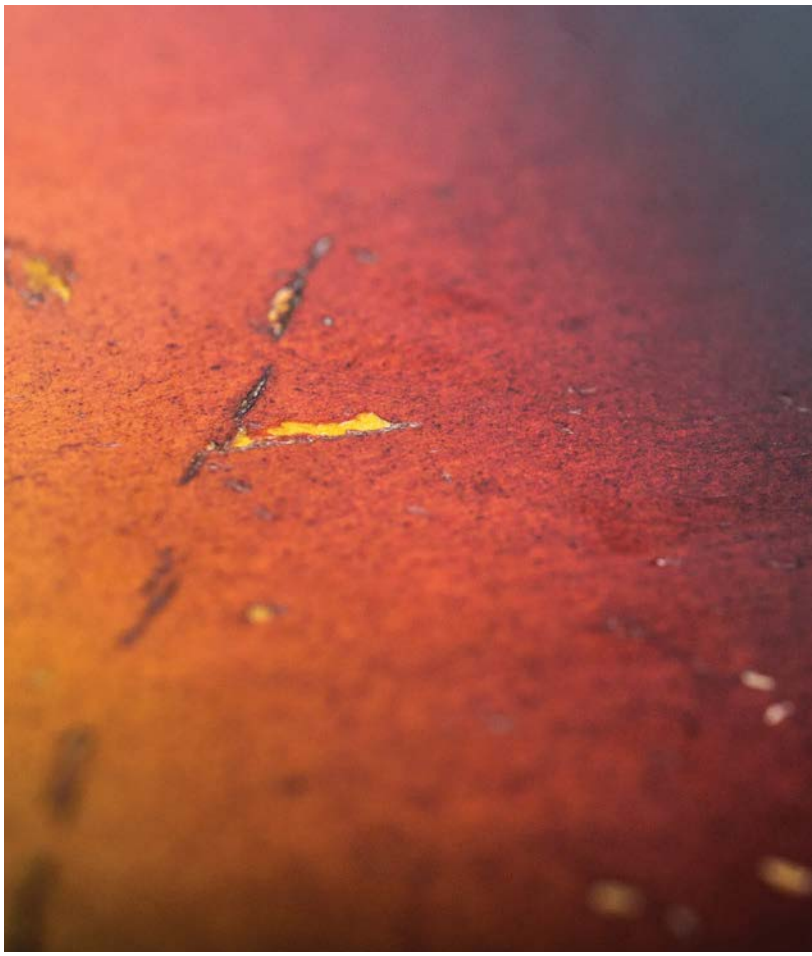
The neck is probably the fattest we've ever encountered on a rosewood-board Strat. The width is pretty standard, but it bears little resemblance to the usual 'skinny at the bottom, fatter up top' profile seen commonly on early-60s examples or the more modern-feeling C typical of the mid-60s. On this guitar, the neck starts out substantial and ends up as a full and deep C just before the body joint. In fact, it's borderline clubby. Despite its worn appearance, this guitar is extremely clean and has never been subjected to tuner swaps or other dubious modifications. An extra string tree was added but subsequently removed, and the only non-factory parts are five of the saddles. The highly corroded condition of the one remaining original suggests this was a repair born of necessity.

The replacement saddles are handmade and somebody made a pretty decent job of it. The machine screws have replaced the intonation adjustment screws, and the sheer effort involved suggests it was done long ago, before replacement saddles were widely available. One of the bridgeplate screws is missing, but the rest of the vibrato assembly looks bone stock. As is typical with vintage Strats that haven't been played in anger for some time, the controls and switch have stiffened up. Everything works, but you don't need to worry about knocking the selector switch out of position, because it needs some persuasion to shift it. Someone decided to have the playing area at the back of the neck blown over; the job was done professionally, but it's the only thing that

detracts from the look and feel of this superb example of a vintage Strat.

Besides a small area where the rear of the headstock transitions to the neck, everything black lights as one would hope – including the back of the neck. It seems the fresh lacquer was blown over what remained of the original finish. If this were our guitar, we'd have no hesitation in gently rubbing off the overspray using micromesh to restore the appearance and enhance the vintage feel.

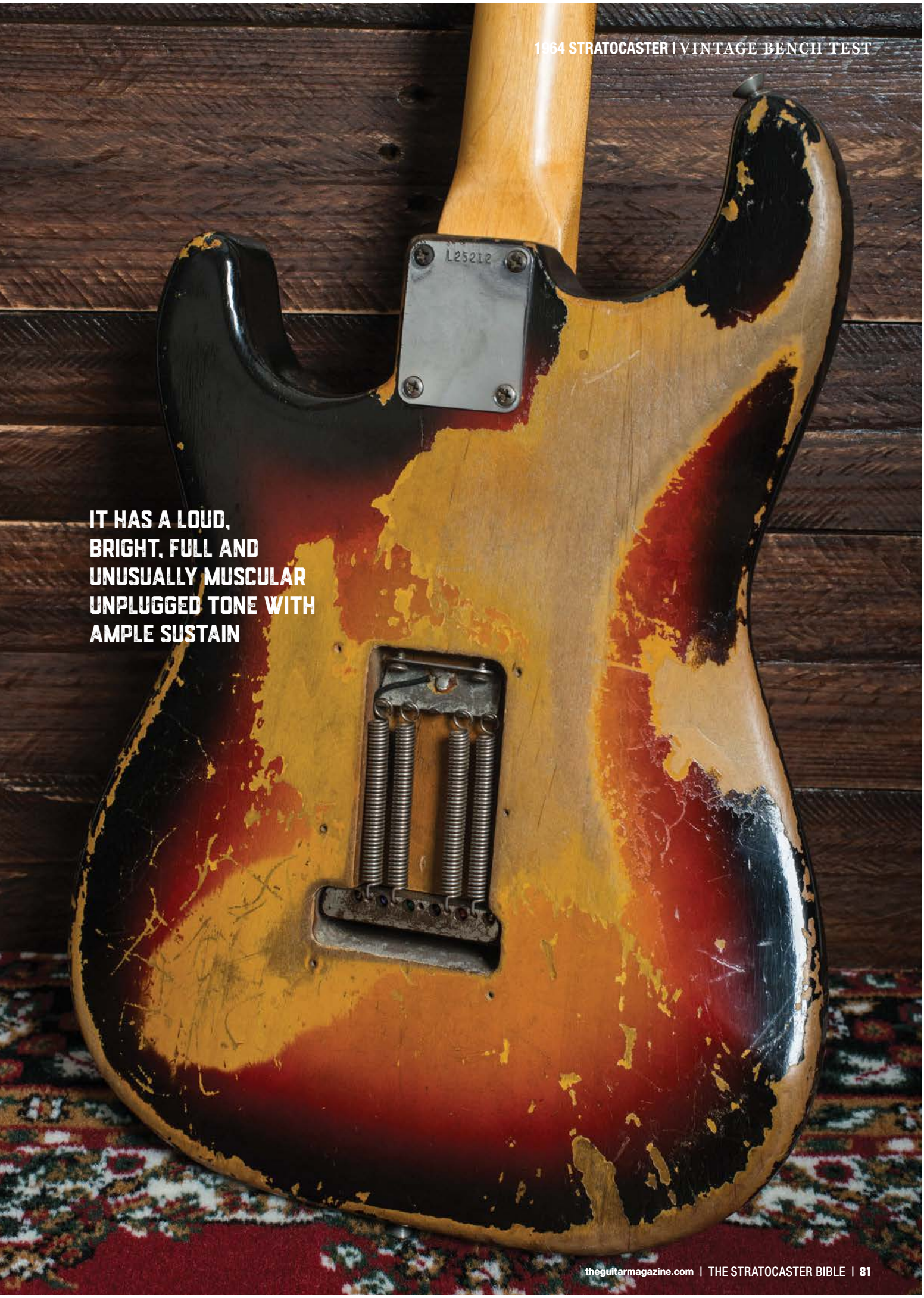
If this guitar was in 'good' condition cosmetically, we probably wouldn't like it half as much as we do. The centre section of the sunburst finish would have been translucent yellow when new, but the clear lacquer top coats have aged to a rich orangey amber. The red band remains well defined without looking too much like a boiled sweet and the edges are a deep dark brown rather than black. On the back, where much of the original finish has worn away to bare wood, the yellow stain can still be seen and the yellow lacquer is more vibrant. There is lacquer



THIS Relic'ers take note – this is what genuine arm wear looks like on the upper bout

ABOVE This sunburst finish from 1964 would have had vibrant yellow and red layers, but both have mellowed with age

RIGHT A severe case of buckle rash has removed much of the finish, but the yellow wood stain can still be seen



IT HAS A LOUD, BRIGHT, FULL AND UNUSUALLY MUSCULAR UNPLUGGED TONE WITH AMPLE SUSTAIN

THIS IMAGE Although the neck has been refretted, the board wasn't level sanded and the clay dots are in fine shape

BELOW RIGHT The near-invisibility of the side dots is one of the downsides of playing vintage Fenders on dark stages

BOTTOM RIGHT They may look as if they have seen better days, but the original single-line Kluson tuners work just fine

KEY FEATURES

1964 FENDER STRATOCASTER

DESCRIPTION Solidbody electric guitar, made in USA

BUILD Solid alder body, bolt-on maple neck with Brazilian rosewood veneer fingerboard, clay dots and 21 jumbo frets

HARDWARE Single-line Kluson tuners

ELECTRICS 3 original pickups, replaced volume pot, original tone controls and three-way pickup selector switch

FINISH 3-tone sunburst body, mostly original neck finish with some overspray, pre-CBS decal

SCALE LENGTH 650mm/25.5"

NECK WIDTH 41.5mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret

NECK DEPTH 21mm at first fret, 24mm at 12th fret

STRING SPACING 36mm at nut, 54.5mm at bridge

WEIGHT 3.38kg/7.45lbs

CONTACT Lucky Fret Music 0207 729 9186 www.luckyfret.com

checking all over the body, but it has formed in tight lines that pretty much follow the grain, and the checking is by no means obvious unless you catch the right angle relative to a light source. The plastic parts are all original, and besides the oft-seen crack above the neck pickup screw, the pickguard is in fine shape.

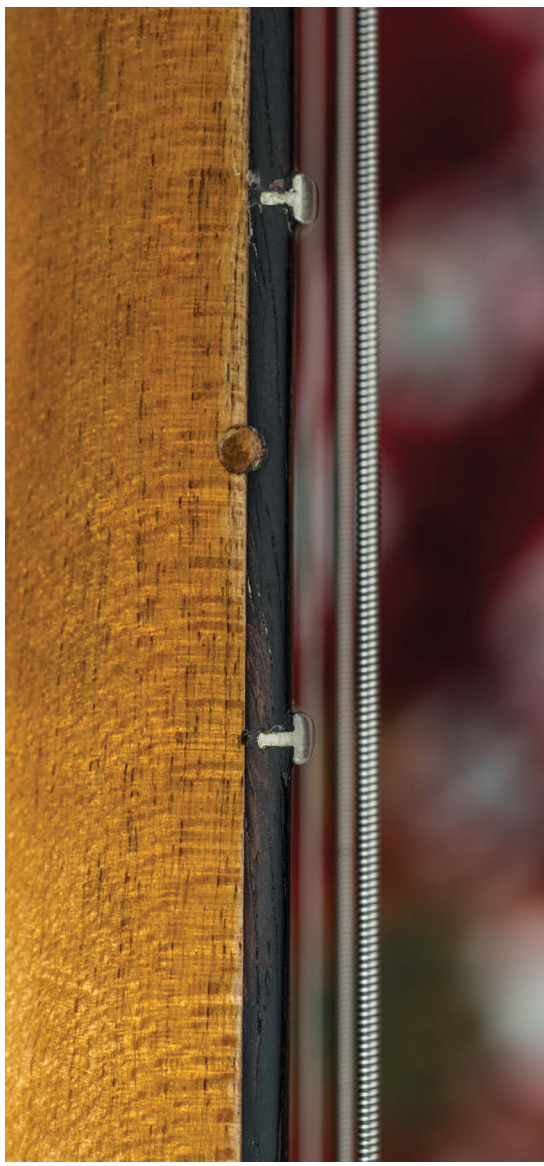
It has shrunk and warped in all the correct places, but not excessively so, and the aluminium shielding plate can be seen underneath. A neck date stamp of 'Jan 64' more or less ties in with the yellow 'April 64' date stamp on the black underside of the pickups, and an 'OK' stamp can be found in the neck pocket along with the paint stick shadow.

IN USE

When tapped, the neck and body produce B notes an octave apart, and when playing you can feel the vibrations through the body. It has a loud, full, bright and unusually muscular unplugged tone with ample sustain.

Thanks in part to a refret with jumbo wire, we can't help wondering if this is what SRV's favourite Strat may have looked and felt like when he found it hanging in Ray Hennig's Heart Of Texas Music store in the mid 70s. This is a million miles away from the lithe and sculpted maple-neck Strats of the late 50s, and it's the sort of guitar that needs to be shown who's boss.

Whoever did the refret had the good judgement to leave the fingerboard well alone. Since it's a veneer



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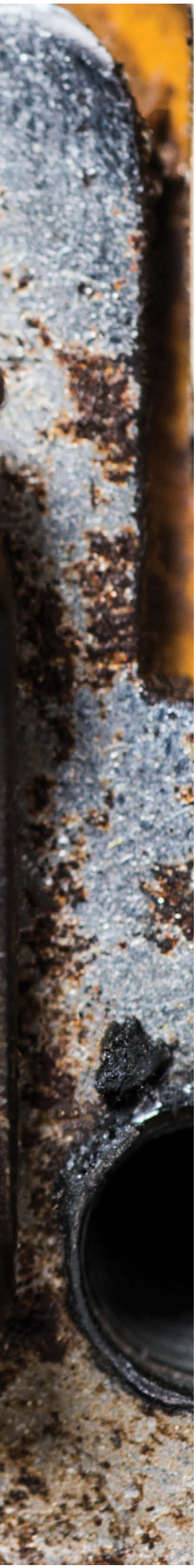
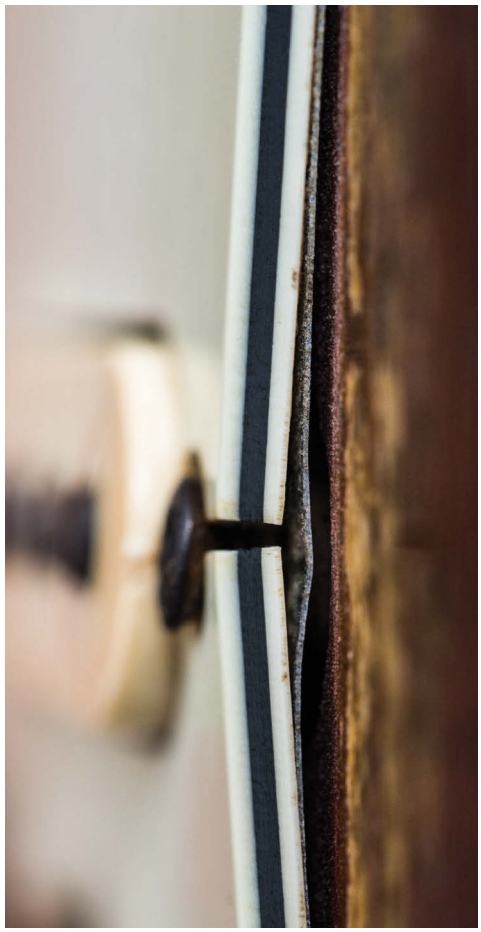


'board, there's not much wood to play with anyway, and although the playwear is extensive and plain to see, it doesn't compromise playability one bit. However, the action is set pretty high and a basic setup followed by a period of regular playing would be needed to loosen this Strat up and get it back to its best.

That wouldn't be a hardship, because the tone is pretty special. It's almost as if the frequency response has been tweaked to extend both higher and lower than a regular Strat. The low strings sound huge through every pickup setting, but there's no boom or muddiness. Instead, you get a remarkably solid punch with taut definition and twang.

The wide-open treble lends glassy clarity without shrillness. String-to-string definition really impresses, with individual notes clearly ringing through chords. Played clean, the SRV and Frusciante comparisons are unavoidable, and I really couldn't resist breaking out the old TS9 and Big Muff.

This Strat morphs from poppy, funky and percussive cleans to a full-throated and velvety roar with added gain. Through the TS9, it does an odd thing whereby the sound gets brighter and sweeter when you turn down the volume. Then, when you turn up, the overdrive thickens and darkens into meaty and effortless sustain.



LEFT top Judging by the condition of the one remaining saddle, it's unsurprising that the others needed replacing

THIS IMAGE AND ABOVE The slight bulge in the pickguard to the right of the screw, and the gap to the left of it, shows how the celluloid shrank as it aged

It's maybe not for fans of delicate and refined Strats, but if you like to dig in hard when soloing and attack the strings with gusto when playing rhythm, this Strat will not shy away. In fact, I found myself instinctively playing harder than normal – more like I'd approach an acoustic.

Perhaps you're wondering if the tonal character comes from the high action, high-output pickups or a combination of both. The truth is none of the above because I lowered the action before sending it back and the pickups all read around 6k. Every so often, you find a Strat that has more grunt and power than usual, and this just happens to be one of them.

THE NECK IS PROBABLY THE FATTEST WE'VE EVER ENCOUNTERED ON A ROSEWOOD-BOARD STRAT

THIS Handmade saddles have replaced five of the originals. The replaced saddles have machine screws for intonation adjustment, but no springs

LEFT A rusty plate screw always seems to accompany heavy heel wear

BOTTOM LEFT Like so many vintage Fenders, this Strat once had an extra string tree to sharpen the string break angle over the nut

VOLUME
TONE
TONE

Fender Player Stratocaster

The past two years have seen Fender reinvent its American Standard series as American Professional, and American Vintage as American Original. Now the company's attention turns to its entry-level models as Chris Vinnicombe says adios to the popular Mexican Standards and hola to the Player series...

Walk into any pub in the Western world and – assuming that it hasn't recently been turned into an artisanal gin bar staffed by Victorian-strongman lookalikes with a cassette-only music policy – if there's a band playing on stage, then it's more likely than not that someone will be playing a Mexican-made Fender electric guitar. Or a Fender Hot Rod Deluxe. Or both.

To say these are products that are part of the staple diet for the grassroots gigging musician is an understatement. We all know the story: our first guitar was a borderline-unplayable nylon-string acoustic, then we graduated to a Squier Strat while making a teenage racket in the garage. It was perfectly functional, but the allure of the 'real thing' was strong. We just had to have that iconic logo on the headstock, didn't we? Although the funky Duo-Sonic and Mustang models in the Offset series that arrived back in 2016 represent a hip and very reasonably priced entry point into the catalogue, not everybody shopping for their first Fender wants a compact, short-scale instrument. So, just ahead of Summer NAMM 2018, Fender decided that the time was right to reimagine its entire Ensenada-made Standard line, last overhauled back in 2011. Enter the new Player series.

THE NEW PICKUPS OFFER A MORE EXPRESSIVE AND SOPHISTICATED RANGE OF VOICES THAN THEIR MEXICAN STANDARD FOREBEARS

"The Player series is the entry price point to the Fender brand if you're looking for a traditional Strat, Tele, P-Bass, Jazzmaster et cetera," says Justin Norvell, Senior Vice President of Fender Products. As well as ticking all the 'first serious guitar' boxes for musicians taking a step up from a beginner's instrument, Norvell also believes that the Player series will be a hit with "pros looking for a backup axe, bassists looking to dabble with fretless or five-string, and modders that want a great base platform."

"The main thing is that so many upgrades are subtle," Norvell notes. "One could look at it from arm's length and think it looks the same... but literally everything is changed!" With that in mind, then, it's time for us to take a closer look...

With 21 different models in the Player series, and over 90 different variations when you throw the myriad new finish options into the mix, there's an awful lot to take in. The standard Strat configuration is accompanied in the range by HSS, HSH, Plus Top, HSS Plus Top and Floyd Rose versions. There are models available for lefties, with either maple or pau ferro fingerboards, and the whole Player range is priced competitively with MSRPs between £549 and £789 – the Strat is £559.

Aside from new Modern C necks with classic 'spaghetti' headstock logos across the range and 22 medium-jumbo frets on all six-string electric models, the Player models come equipped with more curvaceous bodies with improved radii, new hardware, an attractive palette of vibrant new

KEY FEATURES

FENDER PLAYER STRATOCASTER

PRICE £559

DESCRIPTION Solidbody double-cutaway electric guitar. Made in Mexico

BUILD Alder body, bolt-on maple modern C neck with pau ferro 9.5" radius fingerboard, 22 medium jumbo frets and synthetic bone nut

HARDWARE Standard cast/sealed tuners, two-point Synchronized vibrato bridge with bent steel saddles, 3-ply parchment pickguard

ELECTRICS 3x Player Series Alnico V Strat single-coil pickups, 5-position blade pickup selector switch, master volume, neck/middle tone, bridge tone

SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm

NECK WIDTH 42mm at nut, 51.8mm at 12th fret

NECK DEPTH 21.1mm at first fret, 22.3mm at 12th fret

STRING SPACING 36mm at nut, 51.7mm at bridge

WEIGHT 8.5lbs/3.8kg

FINISH Sonic Red gloss polyester, satin urethane on back of neck with gloss urethane headstock face. Also available in Polar White, 3-Colour Sunburst, Black, Tidepool (maple 'board only), Buttercream (maple 'board only), Sage Green Metallic (pau ferro 'board only)

CONTACT Fender EMEA
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www.fender.com

finishes and perhaps most significantly, upgraded pickups featuring alnico magnets.

"The Standard models had slightly hot and dark ceramic bar magnet pickups that we felt didn't really bring out all the nuance, personality and clarity that a Fender is known for, but they did perform well with higher gain sounds," explains Norvell. "Therefore, we knew we wanted to step up to a more complex alnico pickup, while also retaining some hotness and output, so we went with alnico Vs on most guitars and a few have IIs. We went through several months of shooting out pickups and probably a dozen sets until we were happy."

CLOSE ENCOUNTER

As the approaching flotilla of cardboard boxes darkened the horizon at The Guitar Magazine HQ, we dutifully rolled up our sleeves and set about reviewing all 94 permutations of the Player series. Alright, we didn't really do that, or we'd still be writing his long after the magazine had appeared in your hands! What we did instead was decide to focus in on a classic – and resplendent in its Sonic Red livery before us here is the Player Stratocaster. It's a familiar combination, but what sets it apart from the vintage-style Hank and file is a 22-fret, CITES-friendly pau ferro fingerboard (other finish options are available with maple 'boards, see spec on p89 for a full rundown) and two-point vibrato.

If you're reading this and breaking out in a cold sweat at the idea of a Strat with 22 frets and a two-point vibrato assembly, then Fender already makes reasonably priced Stratocasters for you, and they can be found in the Classic Series. The Player's fingerboard edges and fret ends are a little sharp, but as this is an early review sample that hasn't necessarily spent time on a tech's bench, we'll give Fender the benefit of the doubt. In the hand, we encounter a slim Modern C shaped neck with a very flat-feeling combination of 9.5-inch radius 'board and medium-jumbo fretwire. The fingerboard features an extension to accommodate a 22nd fret, while truss-rod adjustment happens at the headstock end, behind a synthetic bone nut. Not having to pop the neck off to tighten or loosen the truss rod is a boon

IT'S RARE THAT A £559 ELECTRIC ENDS UP BEING SO DAMN HARD TO PUT DOWN

for touring musicians who are moonlighting as their own guitar tech, while travelling through shifting climate conditions. The gloss urethane finish on the Player series' headstock fascia avoids the anaemic look of some older Mexican Standard instruments, while the smooth satin finish around the back of the neck has a contemporary, drag-free feel.

PLUGGED IN

In a job in which we're lucky enough to be exposed to the best that the guitar industry has to offer on a weekly basis, it's rare that a £559 electric comes through the door and ends up being so damn hard to put down. The Player Stratocaster isn't quite as immediately exciting as some guitars in the range – our review example is a bit of a heavyweight and its two-point vibrato feels rather elastic and unsubtle compared to the beautiful shimmers offered by the Player Jazzmaster's unit, for example. However, like all of its stablemates, the Strat's new pickups really do help it offer a more expressive and sophisticated range of voices than its Mexican Standard forebears.

There's more going on in the upper harmonics than you'd typically hear at this price point, while the dedicated bridge tone control is handy for taming the highs and offering faux humbucker tones with an overdriven amp or stompbox in the chain. Clean tones are nasal, quacky and vocal – unmistakably the real deal, but in the Knopfler and Rodgers camp rather than SRV or Jimi. That said, break those 'board edges, round off the fret ends, pop a couple of extra springs on the vibrato and throw on a set of 0.011s and we're having a different conversation.

Okay, so this guitar is a little more expensive than its predecessor and we still wish Fender's entry-level guitars came with gigbags, but – and it's a big but, we cannot lie – your post-Brexit tank of petrol isn't as cheap as it used to be, neither is your weekly food shop and neither is your next guitar. Here in mid-2018, the Fender Player Strat – indeed the entire series – represents excellent value for money and is a tangible improvement over the Mexican Standard model. Expect to see and hear a lot more of theem coming to a stage near you.

The Guitar Magazine VERDICT

+ Expressive and very vocal-sounding pickups
+ Dedicated bridge tone control
− Frets and fingerboard edges are a bit on the sharp side

There's much to love here for Strat fans who aren't wedded to total vintage accuracy, including the tempting price tag

9/10

With a two-point vibrato, a bridge tone control, a 9.5-inch 'board radius and headstock-end truss rod adjustment, this is very much a Strat for the pragmatic, modern player

VOLUME
TONE
TONE

– VINTAGE BENCH TEST –

BLONDE MOMENTS

With one foot in 1969 and the other in 1970, this Fender Stratocaster is proof that the company was still making great guitars after the CBS takeover. Huw Price plugs in...

There are many well-travelled vintage guitar myths that don't stand up to scrutiny and are not supported by any concrete evidence. One of the most frequently repeated among these is the notion that 1965 was some sort of corporate 'year zero' for Fender and nothing was ever the same again. The truth is far from that.

Firstly, Leo Fender stayed on as a consultant after he sold the company to CBS, and even helped to develop new Fender models. And from a Strat-specific perspective, many of the features we associate with the pre-CBS era lingered on into the 1970s – the 1970 Stratocaster we have here exhibits several of them.

We can point to the four-bolt neck join, the pressed steel saddles with a patent application that was still pending and the steel vibrato block held to the bridge plate by three hefty screws. Although Fender was using machine-wound plain enamel magnet wire and grey flatwork by 1970, the staggered alnico magnets survived – albeit without their hand-bevelled edges.

KEY FEATURES

1970 FENDER STRATOCASTER

PRICE £12,995

DESCRIPTION Solidbody guitar. Made in the USA

BUILD Ash body, bolt-on maple neck with rosewood veneer fingerboard, pearl markers and 21 frets

HARDWARE Vintage style bridge with separate vibrato block and pressed steel saddles, F-branded tuners with drilled string posts

ELECTRICS 3x original staggered single coils

FINISH Translucent Blonde

SCALE LENGTH 648mm/25.5"

NECK WIDTH 40.96mm at nut, 51.45mm at 12th fret

NECK DEPTH 21.5mm at first fret, 23mm at 12th fret

STRING SPACING 34.7mm at nut, 55.8mm at bridge

WEIGHT 3.45kg/7.6lbs

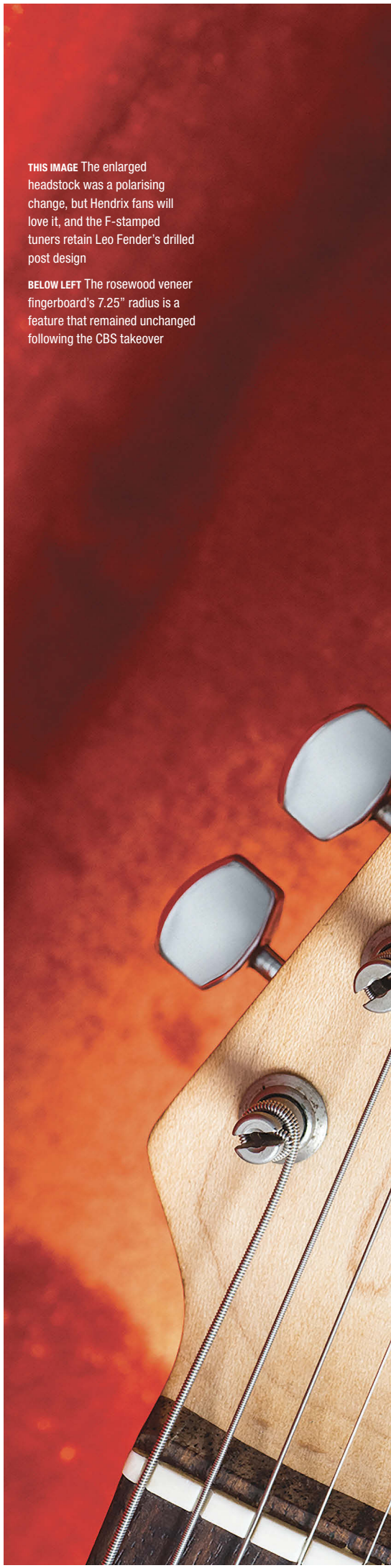
CONTACT ATB Guitars www.atbguitars.com

Post-CBS Stratocaster bodies are generally supposed to be on the heavy side compared to their forebears – in particular the ash ones. However, our blondie's ash body is light enough to have been made from leftover 1950s timber stock. The neck retains some of the older features, too. The clues can be seen beside the neck pickup, where the truss rod adjustment nut is located just below a rosewood veneer fingerboard.

Although neck construction, neck attachment and bridge assembly had remained essentially unchanged from around 1963 onwards, other things were no longer the same. The later features divide opinions today just as they did when this guitar was made.

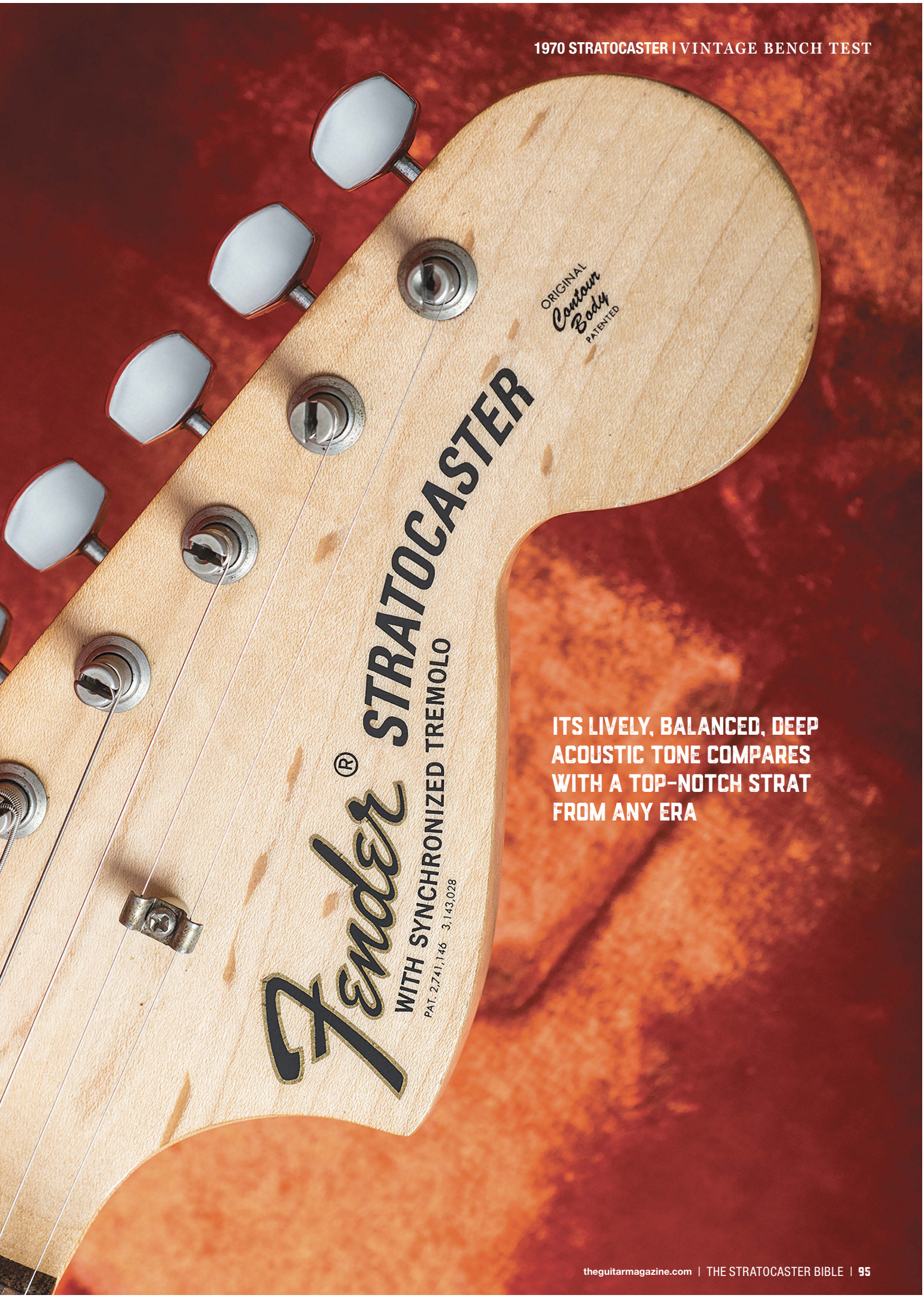
The most obvious break with the pre-CBS era is the reshaped headstock that was introduced in December 1965. Fender's Richard Smith explains that this was done simply to accommodate a bigger decal, but in the process "unintentionally ruined its visual balance".

If you grew up idolising Hendrix, Blackmore or Malmsteen, you may well disagree. The logo certainly showed up better on television and CBS's heightened brand emphasis extended to the F-stamped tuners and neck plate. Although the tuners may look different, they retained Leo Fender's clever drilled post design and they feel much like the earlier Kluson types to use.

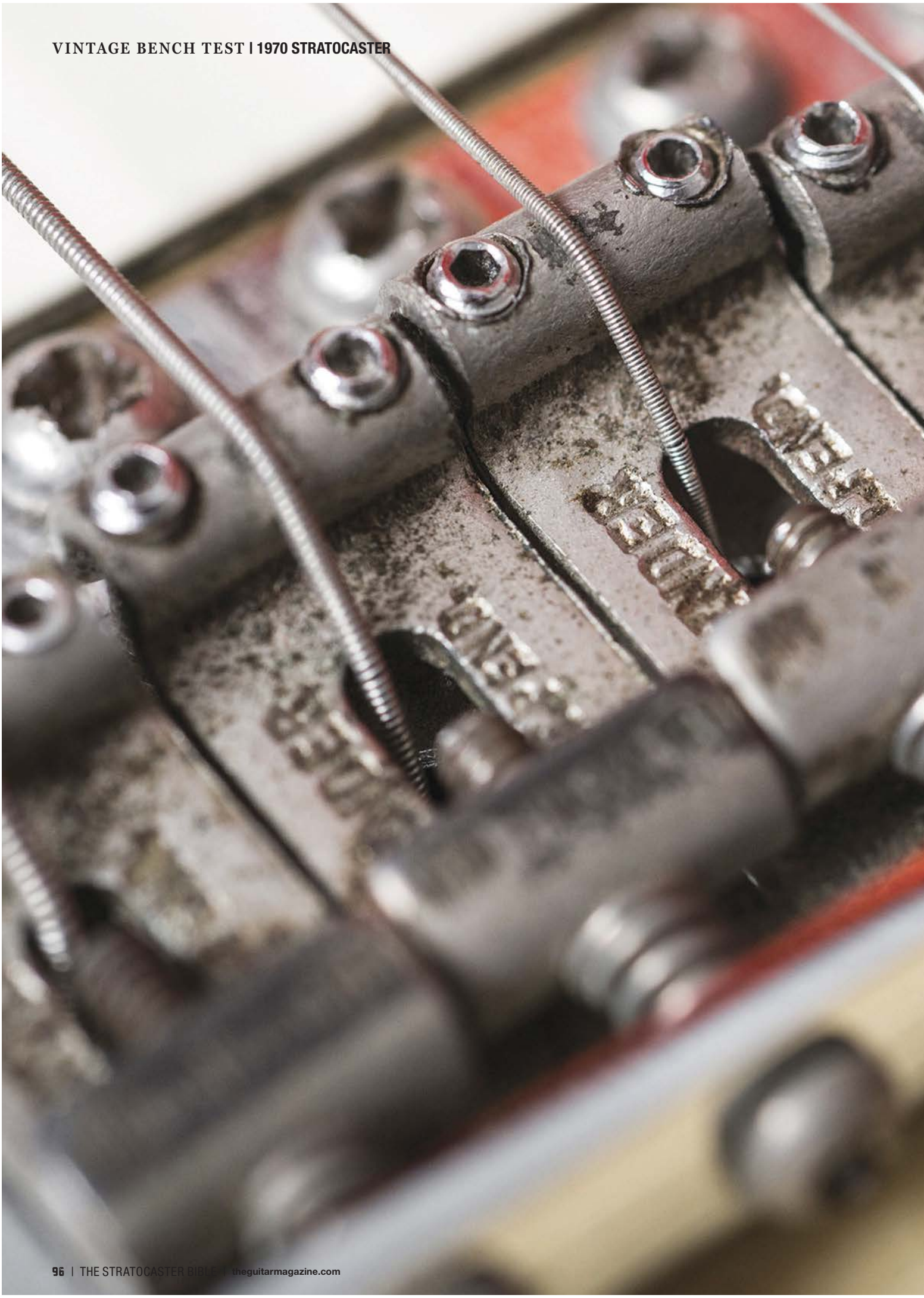


THIS IMAGE The enlarged headstock was a polarising change, but Hendrix fans will love it, and the F-stamped tuners retain Leo Fender's drilled post design

BELOW LEFT The rosewood veneer fingerboard's 7.25" radius is a feature that remained unchanged following the CBS takeover



ITS LIVELY, BALANCED, DEEP ACOUSTIC TONE COMPARES WITH A TOP-NOTCH STRAT FROM ANY ERA



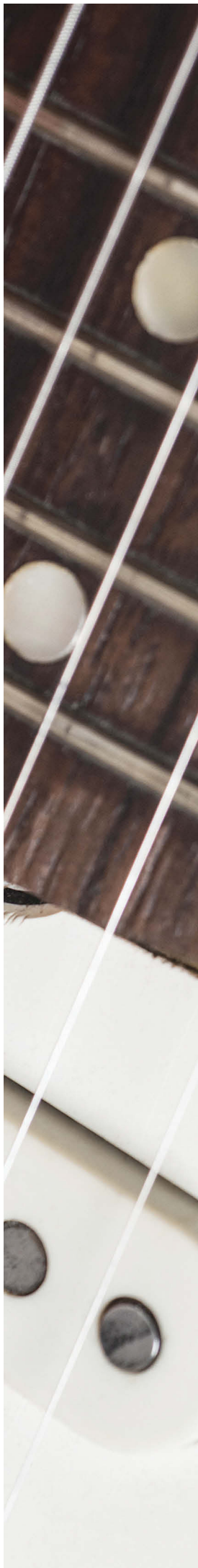
THIS IMAGE The bridge saddles are of the pressed steel variety, still with the familiar 'patent pending' stamp

TOP RIGHT Despite this being a 70s Fender, it retains the classic four-bolt neck join

Even more controversial was the decision to switch from cellulose to aliphatic urethane (aka poly) finishes. According to all the sources, a 1970 Stratocaster should have a poly finish, but the true picture is somewhat more complex. Fender had been using a non-cellulose basecoat called Fullerplast since the early 1960s and some custom colours were actually acrylic rather than nitrocellulose. To complicate matters further, it's reported that some finishes had nitro colours topped with clear poly topcoats, while others had poly basecoats topped with clear nitro. So what exactly is blondie wearing?

The answer is that we're not entirely sure. Everything on this guitar glows under a blacklight exactly as you would expect vintage nitrocellulose to. Peeking under the spring cover we see three original springs and one newer addition, but there is hardly any tan line.

Blacklighting highlights minimal play wear to reveal a white base coat, but the finish condition is remarkable and we imagine the colour looks much the same today as it did when new. There are a few small dents and nicks, but no checking cracks whatsoever. So we're betting on it being a very thin and attractive translucent poly finish, although the headstock face is most likely nitro, because decals reacted badly to poly.



All the plastic parts check out, and the lettering on the knobs has turned a very vibrant shade of green. The seller informs us that the wiring is all original, with unbroken solder joints on the spring claw and output jack. A five-way switch was installed at some point, but a period-correct three-way has been reinstated.

IN USE

It is often said that vintage guitars that haven't been played much probably weren't very good to begin with. However, over the years we've seen several examples of vintage instruments with very little playwear that blow that theory right out of the water. Blondie here is one such example.

As alluded to earlier on in this feature, it also disproves another widely held assumption that all 1970s ash-bodied Strats were ship's anchors. Weighing just 7.6lbs, it has the feel and balance we associate with vintage Strats from the pre-CBS era and its lively, balanced, deep and loud acoustic tone compares favourably with a top-notch Stratocaster from any era.

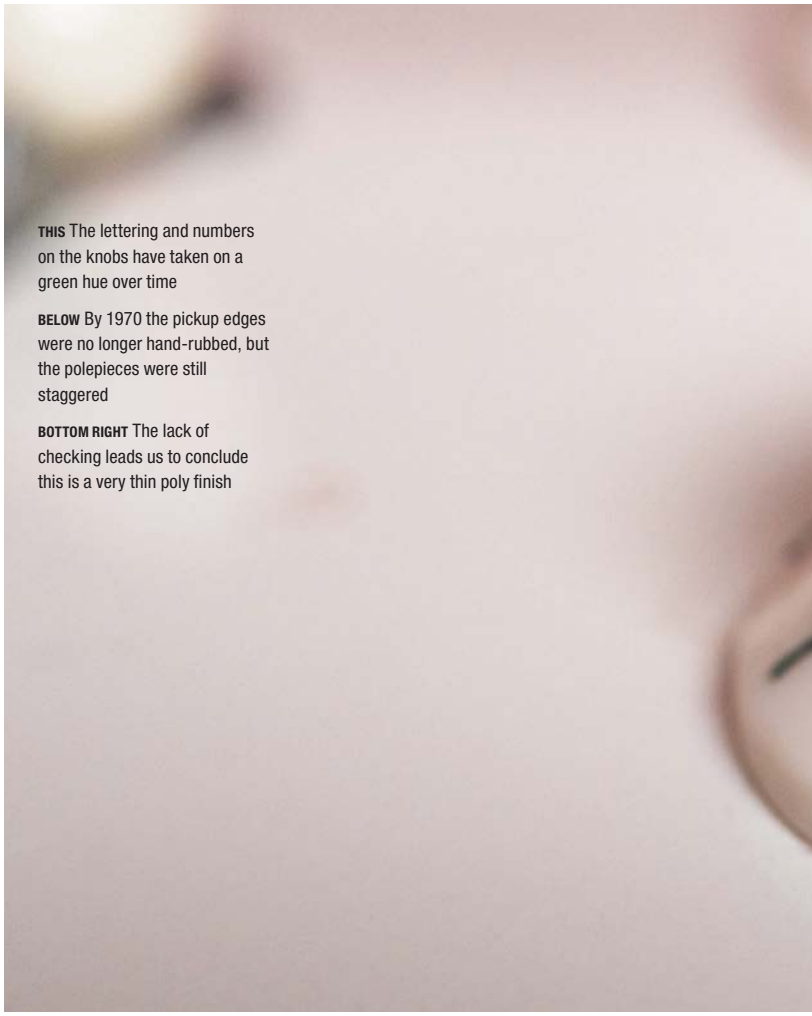
The neck feel is very much of its time with a fairly deep C profile that retains a relatively even depth from headstock to heel, and the 7.25-inch fingerboard radius requires the string action to be set a little higher to prevent bend chokes. Not that you'd notice, because it has a very slinky and played-in feel.

THIS IMAGE & OPPOSITE The neck pocket isn't exactly a snug fit, but it doesn't have any ill effects when it comes to this highly collectible Strat's tone and playability

Plugging in, it soon becomes apparent that the guitar doesn't deliver the chewy and powerful Strat tones typical of the instruments built during the first half of the 1960s. It has a brighter, snappier voice and slightly lower output than a Strat equipped with pre-CBS pickups. It's certainly different, but pretty fantastic in its own way. There's a wiry bite, a metallic edge and a sinewy sort of sustain that works really well for cutting blues solos and chord work. The definition is outstanding and – when you can find them using the three-way switch – the in-between positions are a funkster's dream.

It's not so much an inherent brightness that characterises the pickups, but rather a less forward midrange. Once you figure out how to set the tone controls of your dirt pedal, this can work to your advantage. Glistening cleans can morph into heavy overdrive, while retaining high midrange cut along with tightly defined lows and superb touch dynamics.

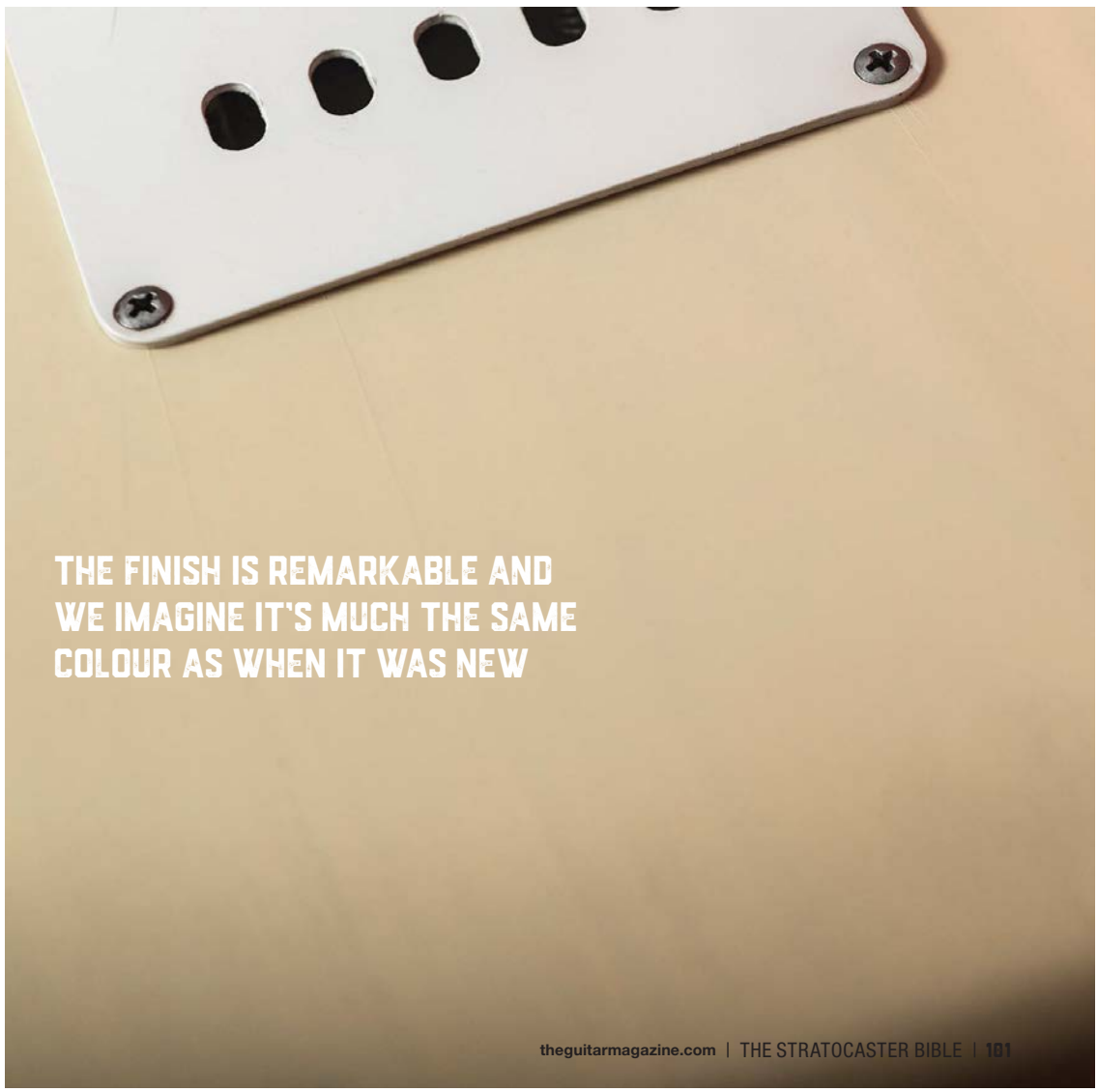
Blonde Strats from this era are rare and it's unlikely that many survive in such 'time capsule' condition. Ultimately our time with this example teaches us that although some things had changed, Fender was still making outstanding guitars at the end of the 1960s.



THIS The lettering and numbers on the knobs have taken on a green hue over time

BELOW By 1970 the pickup edges were no longer hand-rubbed, but the polepieces were still staggered

BOTTOM RIGHT The lack of checking leads us to conclude this is a very thin poly finish



THE FINISH IS REMARKABLE AND WE IMAGINE IT'S MUCH THE SAME COLOUR AS WHEN IT WAS NEW

VOLUME
TONE
TONE

10 STEPS TO A PERFECT STRAT SET-UP

Of all the classic electrics, the Strat is perhaps the most complex to set up. Having said that, there's no real mystery to it, and it's well within the scope of any Stratocaster owner to get their guitar playing properly with accurate intonation and stable tuning.

Perhaps the key is to approach a Stratocaster setup in a holistic manner rather than viewing it as a bunch of unrelated procedures. Getting a Strat set up is – quite literally – a balancing act, assuming of course that you plan to use the vibrato as Leo intended.

There's no point in setting the intonation perfetctly, for example, or the saddle heights for that matter, until you have balanced the bridge. If you do, you'll only end up having to go back and do everything again.

And so the purpose of this handbook is to take you through the processes involved in a Stratocaster setup in a logical sequence. If you follow these steps in the given order, it should help you to avoid having to repeat certain tasks and give you a thorough understanding of the processes involved and the mechanisms at work. Good luck!

G
F
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WHAT YOU'LL NEED

A Steel ruler
B Radius sanding block
C Selection of Allen keys
D Capos
E String winder
F Pliers
G Wire cutters
H Nut files
I Cross-head screwdriver
J Flat-head screwdriver
K Stiff-bristled brush
L Guitar lubrication

1 INITIAL EVALUATION

Whenever you are embarking on a guitar setup you should start with a thorough evaluation. The first thing is to find out if everything is working as it should and whether the guitar actually plays. After all, if the switch or one of the pots has failed, you'll want to fix the electronic issues before putting new strings on a Strat and balancing the vibrato. One of the reasons guitars such as Teles and solidbody Gibsons are easier to maintain is that the strings do not obstruct access to the electronics.

Tune the guitar to concert pitch and check whether the bridge is floating above the body. If it is, you'll see a gap at the back of the bridge between the bridge plate and the surface of the body. If that gap is wider than 3mm or so, you may need to tighten the spring claw until there's about a credit card's width between the body and bridge. This is just about establishing a workable starting point – we'll explore vibrato balancing in detail later on.

If the bridge is flat to the body, take off the spring cover and check to see if the bridge has been blocked to disable the vibrato. Some players prefer it that way, but if you want to use the whammy bar, that block will eventually have to be removed.

At this stage, it's more important to see if the guitar plays, and the method is simple – just tune it up and play it. You don't need feeler gauges or a ruler to tell you whether the action is high or low – just rely on your own experience.

Do the strings choke out when they're bent, or can you hear a lot of buzzing and rattling? If so, the action is set too low. Conversely, if you're finding it hard to fret notes and it hurts your fingers to play, the action is probably too high.

Avoid the temptation to dive straight into adjusting saddle height. Issues of this sort are often indicative of a neck that has too little or too much relief. So first assess the condition of the neck with the strings tuned to pitch.

There are a couple of easy ways to do this. Firstly, fret one of the strings at the first and 15th frets. You can use your fingers or capos. Next, press the string towards the 'board at the seventh fret. There should be a slight gap between the bottom of the string and the top of the fret. If there isn't, the neck might be too straight or, worse still, it's back bowed. If the gap is greater than 0.5mm, the neck has an upwards bow and the truss rod may need to be straightened.

Before proceeding, you need to find how far out the neck is. There's not much point in laying a steel ruler along the top of the frets because you won't learn much about neck straightness if the frets are worn and uneven. Instead, run a ruler along the edge of the fretboard. Line up each end of the ruler along the join between the fingerboard and the maple. If there is some relief, you should see some rosewood or slab maple (if you have a non-slab maple 'board, see step 1) below the ruler line around the seventh fret. If you can't see any rosewood, move the ruler so it's below the 'board and check if you can see any neck maple peeking above the straight edge. If you can, that will probably indicate a back bow.

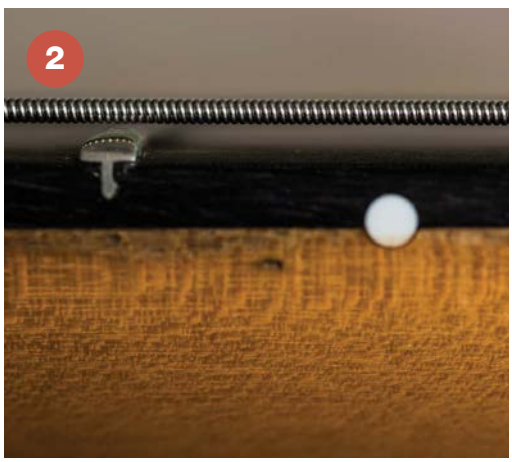
Techs can often tell the condition of a guitar neck just by looking at it, but it takes experience. If the up bow is excessive, it may not be possible to correct it by adjusting the truss rod. Vintage-style truss rods are not designed to fix back bows and if the neck is twisted, regular truss rods will be of no use. So if you think your Strat has a twist or a back bow, take it to a tech for a second opinion. A replacement neck might work out cheaper than getting the original fixed.

WHY YOU NEED THIS

There's no point in trying to fix something until you have identified the issues

WHAT YOU NEED

A keen eye, a metal ruler or straight edge, one or two capos



1 The ruler lines up with the neck/fingerboard join at both ends. The line of rosewood visible below the ruler at the seventh fret reveals a slight up bow. If you don't have a guitar with a rosewood or slab maple 'board, align the ruler where the top of the 'board touches the fret instead, and if there's an up bow, you'll see an air gap between the top of the 'board and the bottom of the ruler

2 The up bow provides some neck relief, which can be seen as a gap between the strings and the frets in the middle of the neck

Fender
1

WHY YOU NEED THIS

Clean guitars tend to be more reliable, easier to maintain, feel nicer to play, and your strings will last longer

WHAT YOU NEED

A clean cotton cloth, a brush with fairly stiff bristles, naptha fluid, fingerboard conditioner/oil, guitar lubricant, polish

2 TEAR DOWN, CLEAN UP & LUBE

When you're performing a full setup on a guitar, it's worth taking the opportunity to give it a bit of a spruce up. Dirt and dust tends to build up on the bridge, so after removing the strings, try cleaning it with a stiff bristled brush and polish the plate with a clean cotton cloth.

If you're working on a Strat with two pivot screws, it's easy enough to remove the springs and lift out the entire bridge. This makes it simpler to clean the bridge parts, and you can add a dab of lubricant to the contact points on the pivot screws. On a vintage-style bridge removing the springs might enable you to get some lubricant under the six retaining screws. Big Bends Nut Sauce tends to work well because you can get the applicator into the right areas.

If the fingerboard is mucky, try cleaning it using a cloth soaked in naptha – aka lighter fluid. You can buy it in most corner shops and with patience, you can lift off most of the grease, dirt and dried skin from maple, rosewood and ebony fingerboards. Try to get right up to the fret edges because dirt really builds up there.

With cleaned rosewood and ebony 'boards, you might also try some fingerboard conditioner or oil. Lemon oil works nicely, or you can even use baby oil. Refined linseed oil works too and will darken the fretboard – assuming you can stand the smell. Allow the oil to soak into the wood for several minutes then wipe away any excess and buff up the 'board with a clean cloth.

If you're a fan of the relic'd look, you might prefer to leave the pickguard untouched. If not, you should be able to wipe off any dust and dirt with a damp cloth then buff it up with a dry one.

Take a brush and cloth to the headstock, too, and clear the nut of any gunk or foreign bodies that have built up.

Nitro-finished necks can begin to feel sticky over a period of time, as they absorb grease and dirt. Sometimes they polish up nicely, but you may need specialist products to draw out the dirt completely. We've had great results with Virtuoso Premium Cleaner and Premium Polish, but there are various other products out there that will do the same job.

If your tuner buttons are dirty, you can bring up the shine with some metal polish, but stick to dry cotton cloth if your hardware is gold plated – otherwise it won't be for much longer.

1 The spring cover has been removed to access the springs and lift out the bridge. All the parts are saved carefully in the plastic cup

2 Lifting out the bridge makes it easier to clean. Brush off the dust and dirt then polish up with a dry cotton cloth

3 Before refitting the bridge we like to add some lubricant to the bridge screws. Here, we're using Big Bends Nut Sauce

1

2

3 TRUSS ROD ADJUSTMENT

Vintage-style truss rod adjustment is located inconveniently at the body end of the neck, so you are obliged to loosen the neck screws and lift up the end of the neck to expose the truss rod screw. Later designs have the adjustment at the headstock end, and while this may not have the vintage kudos, it makes a lot more sense because you can adjust the neck relief with the neck actually under string tension.

So if yours is a vintage-style neck, you will need to make initial adjustments before you re-string the guitar. For this reason, we would suggest preserving the old strings so they can be used when adjusting the neck relief. Since the strings are likely to be on and off a few times, it's preferable to use the old ones rather than risk breaking new ones – assuming you're sticking with the same gauge.

Remember that truss rods are intended for making minor adjustments and they're not 'neck straightening devices'. If there's too much up bow, try turning the truss rod clockwise by a quarter turn and assess the results after a few minutes with the strings tuned to pitch. If there's still too much relief, try another quarter turn and repeat the process until your relief feels 'right'. We'll address what that means shortly.

If the starting point is no relief or even a back bow, turn the truss rod anticlockwise, again in quarter-turns. Back bows can be bad news, but try slackening off the truss rod completely, tuning the strings a tone sharp and leaving the neck to settle overnight.

If you're very lucky indeed, the string pull might straighten out the back bow or even introduce a slight up bow. If so, tighten the adjuster back to the very start of the bite point and drop the strings back down to concert pitch.

You can find all sorts of facts and figures with suggested relief measurements, but all assume that the frets are perfectly level. Since we tend to play in the key of A rather a lot, most guitars have extra fret wear between the fifth and seventh frets, so relying on feeler gauges can be misleading. In the real world, we have to work with what we've got and there's nothing wrong with setting neck relief by playing the guitar and testing how it feels and sounds.

If necessary, set the saddle heights so the action is more or less where you want it to be and begin making the truss rod adjustments you deem necessary. As relief decreases, the action should drop and the guitar may feel easier to play. However, you will notice the tone losing fullness and some buzzing and choke out may become noticeable as the neck straightens.

Generally, it's a matter of finding the best compromise between easy playing and clear buzz-free tone, and you might find it best to work with the guitar unplugged. Also be aware that a lot of neck relief combined with low saddle heights often results in a guitar that plays cleanly up to the 12th or 14th fret, but buzzes across the higher frets.

It's about tone and feel, and most of us will have preferences. Some find extra neck relief necessary when fingerboards have a tight radius – like the 7.5-inch radius on vintage-style Strats. Ultimately, your ears and fingers will tell you more than any radius gauge.

WHY YOU NEED THIS

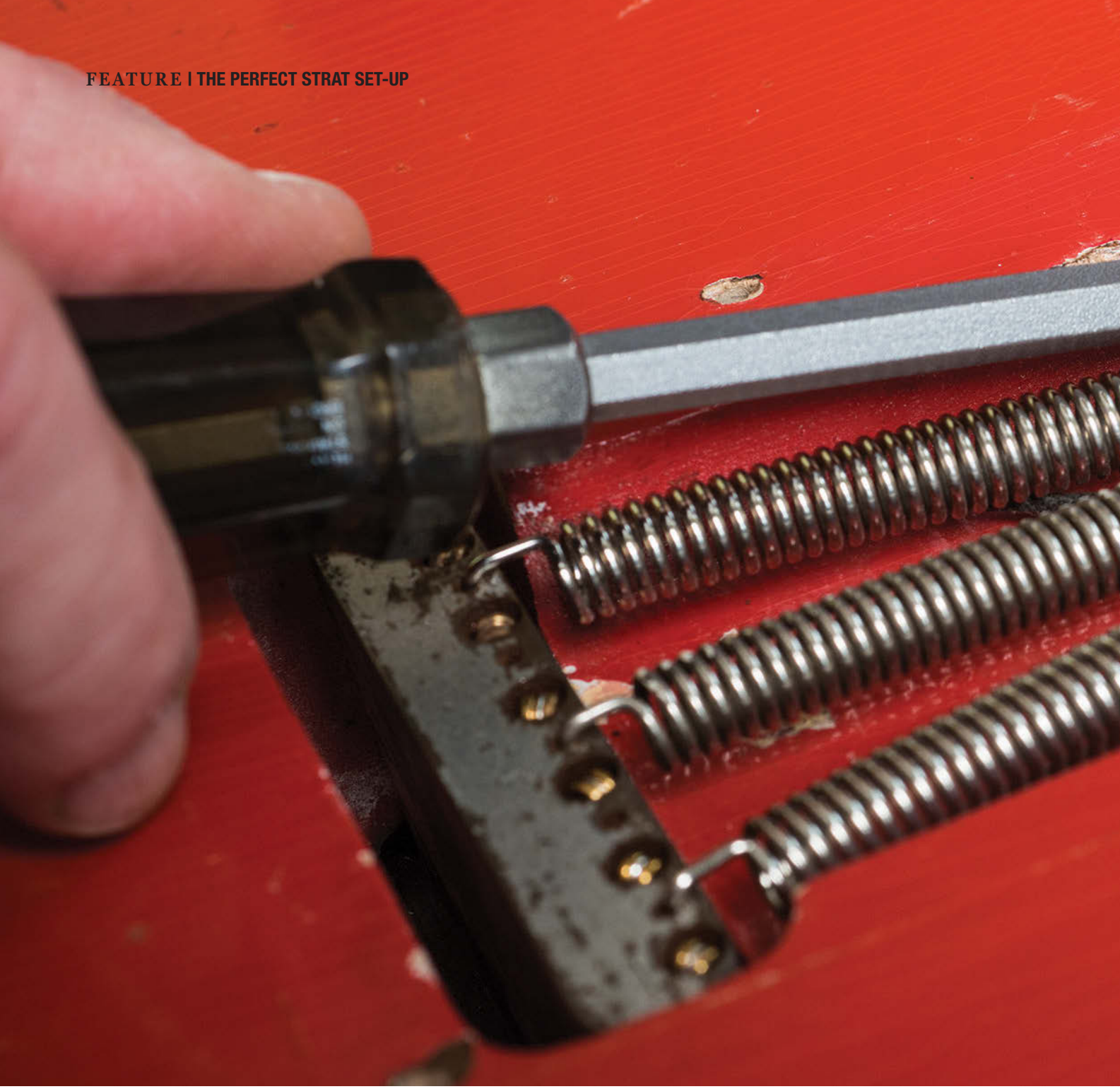
For clean and clear tone, plus easy playability

WHAT YOU NEED

An Allen key or screwdriver, feeler gauge (optional)

1 For modern Strats, you'll need the correct-sized Allen key. The USA models take 1/8" and the Asian ones are 4mm

2 You'll have to pop up the neck to adjust the truss rod of vintage-style Strats. Remember to slacken off the strings first or it may get ugly



4 SPRING CLAW ADJUSTMENT

When you're used to playing fixed-bridge guitars, Strats can throw you a curveball. Bending strings exerts extra pull on the bridge, so it will tip forward as you bend. While you're trying to bend the note sharp the guitar is trying to go flat.

Most seasoned Strat players get used to 'over bending' to compensate – often subconsciously – so they're not even fully aware of the issue. However, when you're playing doublestops with a fixed note on one string and a bent note on an adjacent string, the fixed note will sound slightly flat in pitch.

Consequently, some famous Strat players, most notably Eric Clapton, don't even use their vibrato systems and have them blocked off. The term is literal because the way to do it is to wedge a block of wood between the bridge block and the side of the body rout. This completely fixes the bridge and the bridge plate sits flat on the body. Others deal with the issue by using four or five springs to resist the string pull. However, this can make the whammy bar action feel stiff and unresponsive, so the majority of Strat players settle for a compromise with three springs – one straight and two angled.

WHY YOU NEED THIS

To set the feel and range of the vibrato system

WHAT YOU NEED

A large cross-head screwdriver

Fender intended the 'Syncronized Tremolo' to be a floating unit, with the spring tension balancing out the pull from the strings and the bridge base sitting above the body. There are no absolute rules about setting spring tension because all players require different feels. Some don't require any upward movement, but most prefer to be able to achieve vibrato above and below pitch.

Once you've settled on the optimum number of springs and their orientation – straight or angled – the two screws fixing the spring claw to the body can be adjusted to fine-tune the feel of the system.

Work in small increments, because slackening off the claw screws decreases spring tension, which allows the strings to pull the bridge forward. However, this also flattens the strings, so when you bring them back up to pitch the string pull is even greater and the bridge tilts even further forward.

Similar complications occur when you increase the spring tension, because the springs pull the strings sharp. Tune back to pitch and the bridge will be pulled even flatter to the body – making the strings go sharp. Either way, the system gets a 'double whammy'.

If you work slowly and make only small adjustments you'll soon be able to zone in on the feel and range of movement that suits you. It can be done with surprising precision – session ace Carl Verhayen advocates tuning vibrato systems so that the G, B and E strings pull up a minor 3rd, tone and semitone respectively. It sounds very musical and it's surprisingly easy to set up.

1 To get at the spring claw screws, a large cross-head screwdriver with a long shaft is the best tool if you want to avoid scratching the finish

1

5 SADDLE HEIGHT ADJUSTMENT

We've left this until relatively late in the process, because string height – or action – on a Strat is determined by neck relief and the pitch of the bridge as well as saddle height. If you start with saddle height adjustment without addressing the other issues, you'll end up doing this more than once.

Most of us prefer as low an action as possible, so here's our recommended procedure. Having completed all the truss rod and spring claw adjustments and tuned the strings to concert pitch, adjust the high E string saddle as low as it'll go without string bends choking out. Fractions of a turn on the saddle screws can make a huge difference and we prefer to keep the saddles level. Grub screws usually have flat bottoms, so keeping things square maximises the physical contact area between the saddle screws and bridge plate.

Now switch your attention to the low E string and set the saddle height so it plays cleanly all the way up the neck. If it buzzes when fretted, the saddle is too low. If it buzzes only when played open, the nut slot is probably too low, so put a capo on the first fret to adjust the saddle height.

With the two outside saddles done, place a radius gauge or a radius sanding block across the strings to assess the string radius. You can download a printable radius gauge from Pickguardian.com, and the one you use should match the fingerboard radius. Adjust the A,D,G and B saddles so the strings all sit below the curve and the gauge or block is resting on the two E strings. Carefully adjust all the low saddles upwards until the strings just touch the bottom of the curve and you're done.

If you want to get really picky about it, the string curve radius can (and perhaps should) be slightly flatter than the fingerboard radius; in which case you can lower the four central saddles very slightly. Once again, this is a procedure where your ears and fingers can help you to optimise the setup even after you have taken measurements.

Although this method can achieve excellent results, Strat players often find themselves dealing with saddle screws that protrude high above the saddles. The setup might feel great to play, but try palm muting and it will be less than comfortable.

There are two ways around this. Firstly, the protruding screws are usually most evident on the lowest saddles – the Es and maybe the A and B. If that's the case, and the D and G saddle screws don't protrude, you can buy short saddle screws from suppliers such as Allparts UK. Make sure you order the right ones because USA-made guitars require imperial screws and Mexican and Far Eastern guitars will have metric threads. However, if all the saddles are set really low and the height adjustment screws are protruding, you may need to tilt the neck backwards. The Fender factory used thin shims during Leo's era, but later designed a 'Micro Tilt' system with a grub screw. When shimming a neck, we use a very thin length of wood veneer across the end of the neck just in front of the two deepest neck screw holes.

The shim or angle screw will tilt the neck to introduce a back angle, and it moves the 'board closer to the strings. This requires the saddles to be set higher, which means the height adjustment screws will protrude less – if at all. We prefer not to shim or tilt because we like to maximise the contact area between neck and body, but sometimes it's the only option. However, modern-style bridges with a screw at each end allow you to adjust the overall bridge height as well as the saddle height. If your guitar has that arrangement, try setting the bridge height before adjusting the saddles or shimming the neck.

On occasion, the plain strings fail to produce a clear tone, and in the worst cases you may hear a sitar-like effect. If this happens only when the string is played open, there's probably something wrong with the nut slot. But if it occurs whether fretted or played open, there is probably an issue with the saddle.

Over time, the strings can wear grooves into the saddles that prevent the strings from taking off cleanly. If it's a non-collectable guitar, you might take this as time for a saddle upgrade. On older guitars, you could try swapping the offending saddle with a saddle currently under one of the wound strings. You can also file out the groove and smooth the metal with abrasive paper and metal polish.

WHY YOU NEED THIS

To set the string height

WHAT YOU NEED

The correct Allen key for your saddles

1 Each saddle will have two little grub screws to adjust the saddle height. On old guitars, you may need to dig out the dirt before you can get an Allen key deep enough to turn without stripping the screw

2 A radius block being used as a guide for the string radius. You can also download printable radius gauges from the website Pickguardian.com

3 With modern-style Strat bridges, you can adjust the base plate height as well as the saddle height

4 On vintage bridges, the six screws are merely retainers and cannot be used to set the bridge height

1

6 ONTO THE NUT

We have already touched briefly on nut issues and now that the neck relief, spring claw and saddles have been set, it's time to go into greater detail. A properly slotted nut is essential for the feel and tone of any guitar. It's crucial for tuning stability, too – especially when the guitar is equipped with a vibrato unit.

There are various factors to consider, and the first is slot height. If the slot is cut too deep, the take-off point for the string will be lower than the first fret and the string will buzz when it's played in the open position. If it's too high, the string may ring clearly, but the guitar can feel stiff and uncomfortable to play.

Getting the slot depths spot on requires a degree of skill and ideally access to nut files. Cutting nut slots is a fairly specialised procedure, so you may prefer to leave it to a tech. However, there are a few other nut issues that you might be able to address yourself.

Open strings can sometimes sound a bit dull and choked when the nut slot is too narrow for the string. You can wrap some 1,000-grit paper around the string and try to widen the slot. Some prefer to use a fret file of the next gauge up to achieve the same – so a B-string file in an E-string slot.

Take care to avoid touching the bottom of the slot. Try rocking the file side to side, or maybe flaring the slot outwards on the tuner side to minimise the potential for the slot to 'pinch' the string.

Another symptom of a badly cut nut is a double groove at the bottom of the slot. This often manifests as a click or ping when you bend a string and it jumps from one groove into the other. You can always feel it and sometimes you'll even hear it. Take some 1,000-grit paper, fold it loosely and use it to smooth the bottom of the slot. The object isn't to make the slot deeper, just to remove the grooves. Work slowly, check your progress regularly by popping the string back in the slot and bending, and stop as soon as the string bends smoothly. To get the slots really smooth, place masking tape along both sides of the nut to protect the fingerboard and polish the slots with chrome polish and a cotton rag.

Many techs agree that the nut is one of the key determining factors in the playing feel of a guitar. You may have noticed how some guitars feel stiff and uncooperative even when the frets are in good shape and the action is set low. In contrast, a similar model with an identical setup can feel smooth and slinky.

The difference may be the ease with which the strings slide back and forth in the nut slots, and the mysterious process of 'playing in' a guitar is really about finessing the nut slots through continual use. Armed with this knowledge, you can accelerate the process by ensuring the nut slots are smooth and slippery. In addition to improving tuning stability, your Strat will play better than ever.

WHY YOU NEED THIS

For optimum playing feel and tuning stability

WHAT YOU NEED

Nut files (optional), 1,000-grit wet and dry paper, chrome polish, a cotton rag

1 Properly cut nut slots are crucial for tuning stability, playing feel and open-string tone

2 Nut files are expensive and only worth buying if you intend doing a lot of nut work. Most of the basics can be done with fine-grade abrasive paper wrapped around the strings or folded to fit the slots

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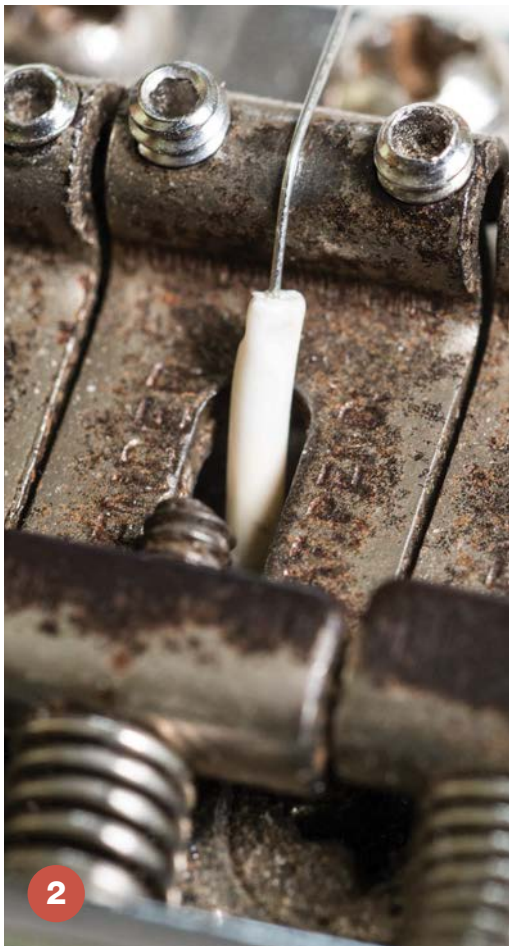

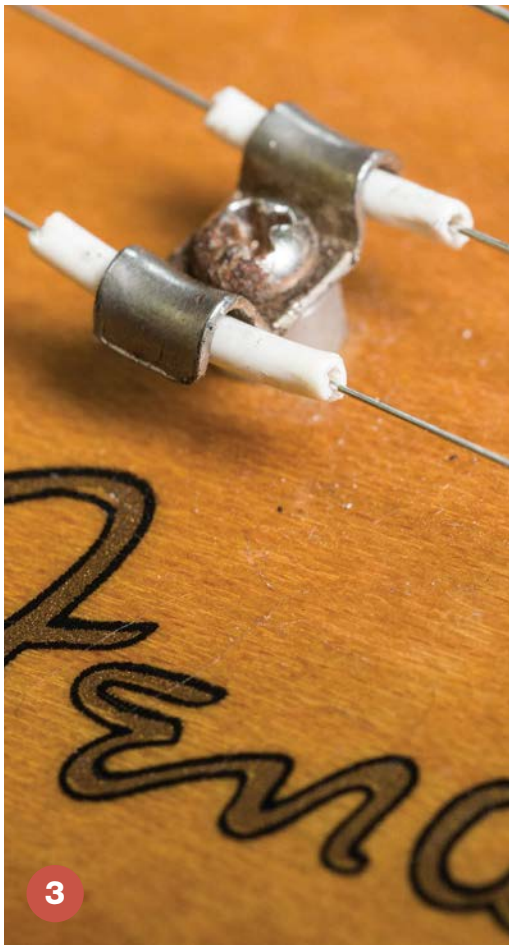

WHY YOU NEED THIS

Getting this bit right optimises tone and tuning stability

WHAT YOU NEED

Wire cutters and a string winder (optional) cotton rag

7 FITTING THE NEW STRINGS

In order for an open string to ring clearly, it needs a clean 'take-off' point from the nut. Techs will often cut nut slots slightly angled downwards towards the tuners to achieve this. This angle is referred to as a 'break angle' and more traditional guitars than Fenders have always had angled headstocks to ensure a break angle is always present.

To achieve a decent break angle over the nut on a Stratocaster with vintage-style tuners, there's a technique that you should follow. Regardless of how the string attaches to the post, the key is to achieve a proper break angle through multiple wraps around the tuner post. Each wrap goes under the previous one, and the string tension will eventually pull them tightly together. The more wraps you get onto the post, the more acute the break angle. Initially, Fender had just one string tree, for the B and E strings, but later began using a second for the D and G strings. If your Strat has string trees, you needn't bother with post wrapping because the string tree height determines the break angle. Of course, you can still alter the angle by inserting a spacer between the headstock and the string tree.

Eric Johnson has long maintained that you don't need string trees at all and that it's preferable to dispense with them because they are a source of friction and therefore tuning instability. His signature Strat has staggered tuner posts and a few millimetres skimmed off the front of the headstock to make it work, but it's perfectly possible to remove the trees on a regular Strat and wind the B and E strings to the base of their tuner posts.

There are several areas on Strats that can lead to string breakage, and SRV's tech Rene Martinez used a few tricks to minimise breakages from his heavy-handed employer.

Check the bridge area for the point where the strings exit the holes in the base plate. Sometimes the angle is such that the string is pulled tight against the sharp edge of the hole. The openings in the saddles can also be potential breaking points.

The simple solution is to strip the plastic insulation off electrical cable, cut it into short lengths, slip the plain strings through the middle and use the plastic to cushion the break points. You can do the same thing to guide the strings under the string tree.

1 Wrapping the strings down the tuner posts creates a good break angle over the nut. This optimises open-string tone, but if you make the angle too steep, it can prevent the strings from moving freely in the slots

2 Check out the G string because it's creased across the opening of the saddle and that can be a break point. Plastic sleeves have been slipped over the B and E strings to cushion them

3 Plastic sleeves under the string tree can reduce friction and enhance tuning stability

8 SETTING THE INTONATION

You probably thought we'd never get to this stage, but we left it until this point in the process because the neck relief, bridge balance and a height all have a bearing on a guitar's scale length.

Although you can use a guitar tuner to adjust your intonation, the virtual 'strobe tuner' apps that you can download for smartphones and tablets are incredibly accurate and display tuning in fraction-of-a-cent increments.

Using the 12th-fret harmonic/fretted-note comparison at the 12th fret is a perfectly valid approach, and it can achieve good results, but it's crucial to ensure all the strings are tuned accurately to concert pitch before making adjustments. Remember the bridge position is the result of the

WHY YOU NEED THIS

To make the guitar sound in tune all the way up the neck

WHAT YOU NEED

A cross-head screwdriver with a sharp tip and long shaft

balance between spring and string tension, so if some of the strings are not at concert pitch the bridge will not be at its null point and any adjustments that you make will be inaccurate.

There's another complicating factor when you're setting Strat intonation – the magnetic pull from the pickups inhibits string vibration as you move up the neck and the fretted notes get closer to the pickup slugs.

This is particularly noticeable on the low E and A strings, when the pitch of the notes sounds slightly flat. This will make any comparison between the note and the harmonic at the 12th fret spurious, and setting the intonation will become little more than guesswork. The solution is to adjust the pickup heights so they're as far away from the strings as possible. With the reduced magnetic pull, you should be able to set the intonation without difficulty.

If the guitar was sounding good before the setup and you liked the overall balance of the three pickups, you might want to measure the pickup heights before dropping them down so you can return them to their original positions. Although the excessive string pull will return, many players are so used to the phenomenon they just work around it.

1 Use a long-shaft screwdriver to set the intonation, otherwise your screwdriver might slip off the screws and scratch the paint. Bad news unless you're shooting for a relic'd look

1

2

9 SETTING THE PICKUP HEIGHTS

Again, there is no 'right' way to do this, but there are factors to consider. Getting the magnets and coil close to the strings increases treble and output level. Dropping them further away removes some of the edginess and results in a smoother and more open tone, but output is lower.

Setting pickup height is a trade-off between tone and volume, and much depends on your priorities and taste. With multiple pickups, it's also a balancing act because ideally the pickups will all produce the same output level. As Strats have three pickups, it's a bit trickier to achieve – but it's not too hard.

Here's the method we use, and we think it yields pretty good results. Having just set your intonation, your pickups should all be adjusted pretty low. With an amp at a medium volume level and the tone controls set neutral, we begin with the bridge pickup.

Raise the height and listen to the way the sound changes, and experiment to achieve your preferred tone and output level – always trying to keep the pickup level across the top. Once you're happy, pick out the notes of an open E chord and adjust the pickup height so the low E and A strings are at the same volume level as the B and high E. You can test this by playing chords higher up the neck, too, and the object is to get every string ringing out at pretty much the same level. If the bass strings dominate, lower that side of the pickup. If the treble strings are too bright, then lower that side.

Once you're happy, move to the neck pickup. The initial goal is to get its volume balanced with the bridge pickup so, again, keep the pickup level and go for a general balance before fine-tuning the treble and bass strings. You should be able to play a figure on the B and E strings on the neck pickup and then play it again on the bridge pickup with no change in volume.

Since their physical locations make the neck pickup the loudest and the bridge the quietest, the neck pickup will end up further from the strings. If you recall the magnet pull issue we mentioned, you'll know this is no bad thing.

The procedure is broadly similar for the middle pickup, but this time you have two pickups to compare, as well as the in-between positions. After achieving a basic pickup-to-pickup balance, you can fine-tune the in-between positions because the 'phasiness' is quite dependant on setting the pickup height.

If you're quick enough with the screwdriver, you can play a chord and hear the sound change as you move the middle pickup. Once it's dialled in for maximum quackiness, the middle pickup usually balances well with the other two.

WHY YOU NEED THIS

To achieve a balanced tone with even pickup-to-pickup levels
What you need

WHAT YOU NEED

A cross-head screwdiver

1 A screw at each end of the pickup allows you to set the height

2 When setting the intonation, you may achieve more accurate results if you lower the bass sides of the pickups before you start. In the process, you may discover the balance is improved and they sound better

10 STRING STRETCHING

New strings always take a little while to settle down and stay in tune consistently, but you can circumvent the 'settling' process somewhat by stretching them. Put on your new strings, tune them to concert pitch then wrap your fingers under the low E and pull it upwards – away from the fingerboard.

Start at the nut end and work your way along the string, all the way to the bridge. You'll feel it stretch and the pitch will drop, so tune it back up to pitch and repeat the process. Usually, you'll need to do this at least three times before the string maintains its pitch.

Move on to the A string and do it all again, then stretch each of the other strings in turn. Be careful not

WHY YOU NEED THIS

To help new strings settle in quickly and stay in tune

WHAT YOU NEED

Your fingers, a tuner and some nut lube

to stretch the plain strings too much, because it's easier to snap those than the wound strings. It's better to carry out four or five gentle stretch cycles than rush the whole process.

It's also advisable to place your hand over the stretched string, just behind the nut, and press downwards. The idea is to avoid pulling the strings off their tuner posts and snapping them on the sharp string tree edges. Only after stretching the strings would we advise lubricating the nut slots. You can use graphite from a soft pencil, petroleum jelly or a specialist product such as Big Bends Nut Sauce. One of the reasons we prefer bone nuts is the bone absorbs the lubricant and stays slippery. Don't skip this part, because most tuning stability issues are caused by friction, not the tuners.

Well, if you've made it this far you've evaluated and cleaned your Strat, straightened out any neck issues, balanced the vibrato, adjusted the saddle heights, put on new strings (properly) and set the intonation. Congratulations – you're done! Now stop fiddling about and go and play the bloody thing...

1 Work your way all along the string and tune it back up to pitch when you finish. You will probably need to do this three or four times before the string stops stretching completely. Don't pull too hard because strings snap easily. Try pressing firmly behind the nut to prevent the strings pulling off the posts

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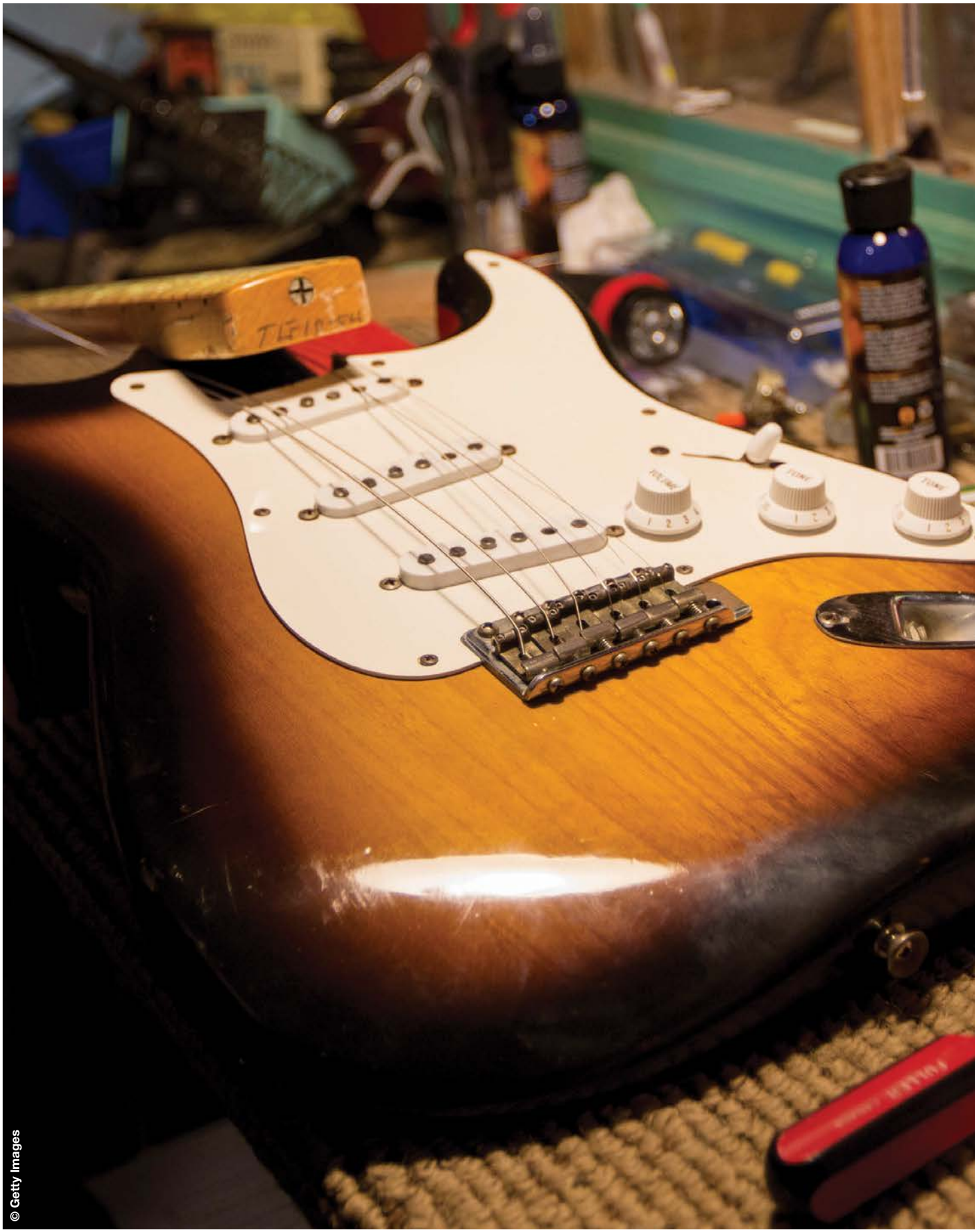

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ALL ABOUT...

Tadeo Gomez

Fender's greatest-ever neck carver was an orphaned migrant worker who walked a thousand miles to get to America. Huw Price profiles the legendary Tadeo Gomez...

Pick up any book on Fender history and check out the 1950s factory pictures for proof that Fender's employees were a mixed group. Look at some of the signatures inside the tweed amps and you'll encounter the names of Lydia Sanchez, Lupe Lopez and Maybelle Ortega. The staff also included Geraldine Herrera working on lap steels and Art Cordero on pickguard duty, among many others. Indeed, many of the most iconic Fender guitars and amps ever were crafted by members of the Latino community back in the 50s and 60s.

And then there was the worker commonly identified by his initials 'TG'. Besides those who worked most closely with Leo Fender, the company's most famous employee from that era is almost certainly Tadeo Gomez.

Today, many regard him as the greatest neck carver of the 1950s, and his style of shaping necks has influenced countless guitar makers. These days, any 1950s Fender guitar with a neck that can be attributed to Gomez will be worth a premium.

WALKING THE LINE

Tadeo Gomez was born in 1902, in a town called La Cueva in the Mexican state of Jalisco. Both his parents died within two weeks of each other when he was just 12 years old, and Tadeo was left to take care of his younger siblings. His older brothers had already left Mexico and were working in a silver mine in Jerome, Arizona, so Tadeo decided to join them when he was 13 or 14. Walking was the only way he could get there, so he followed the railway tracks for over 1,000 miles, surviving on banana peels and other leftover food that the passengers had thrown from train windows. Tadeo eventually made it and began working in the mines, where one of his brothers would later be killed.

He married a woman named Petra in 1925 and they followed the crops to Northern California. By 1943, Tadeo, Petra and their six children were living in the small city of La Habra, in Orange County, California. In his book, The Blackguard, Nacho Baños notes that Tadeo was almost certainly working for Leo Fender during 1950, because his signature has been found on some very early Broadcaster necks. La Habra is just five miles away from Fullerton, where Leo's factory was famously located, and Tadeo's son Benjamin recalled that "there used to be quite a few from La Habra that worked at Fender".

Tadeo would occasionally take his son to the Fender factory, and Benjamin remembers his father often worked under a canopy. He told the La Habra Journal: "Dad would be outside sanding and shaping the necks. Sometimes, he carved a little to get it just right. He had taught himself woodworking. Nothing was too hard for him to learn."

The 'TG' initials on a 50s Fender are a good indication that the neck was shaped by Tadeo Gomez

THE TADEO TAPER

Two features appear to characterise the necks shaped by Tadeo Gomez. Some credit him with developing Fender's 'soft V' profile, and he's also known for shaping the soft transition from the back of the headstock to the area behind the nut. Nacho Baños declares that Tadeo's style has become "a master reference by which today's reproduction necks are judged" and some people even call this the 'Tadeo taper'.

Once he was satisfied with a neck, Tadeo would initial and date the end of the truss rod in pencil; then these marks would be sealed under the lacquer finish. However, there is some debate and controversy about whether every one of the necks with Tadeo's signature was actually carved by Tadeo himself.

Much of this arises from inconsistencies in the handwriting, because some initials appear squared off while others are quite rounded. There are also necks signed 'TAD' and even 'TADEO', and it's been speculated that Tadeo eventually took on more of a foreman's role, supervising neck carving and authorising other workers to sign the necks off once he had approved them. While researching this article, we also found pictures of '51 and '52 Telecasters with 'TADEO' and 'TG' signatures in the neck pockets. It's been noted that things were pretty chaotic at the Fender factory prior to eventual VP Forrest White's arrival, and that employees would work all over the shop. So maybe Tadeo routed a few bodies while he was at Fender, too.

TADEO GOMEZ'S STYLE OF SHAPING NECKS HAS INFLUENCED COUNTLESS GUITAR MAKERS

TIME OUT

Tadeo left Fender in 1957 due to disagreements with a new supervisor who felt that his work wasn't up to the required standard. Instead, he took a job as a carpenter working on the construction of Disneyland and this job lasted until the mid-1960s, when he returned to Fender. By that time, Leo Fender had sold his company to the giant CBS Corporation. The subsequent CBS years were very much the dark days of Fender, when the company's reputation was almost ruined by questionable management. The greatest neck shaper in Fender's history was re-employed as a maintenance man.

Some cite this situation as an example of CBS's ineptitude, because Tadeo's expertise could surely have been better utilised. No doubt this is partly true, but Fender's manufacturing process had evolved since the late 1950s. Neck fashions had changed, too, and by the mid 1960s, none of the major manufacturers were making the sort of chunky V-shaped necks Tadeo was known for.

It might also be instructive to look at Tadeo's birthdate and do the maths. He began his second stint at Fender when he was in his mid-60s, and carving necks by hand is quite an arduous and physically demanding process. Perhaps Tadeo was happy to be doing less physically demanding maintenance work and besides which, the Fender factory was still making pretty great necks during that time. Tadeo's second term at Fender ended in 1969, after an accident at work. He was carrying out some electronic maintenance work when he received a shock that threw him off a ladder.

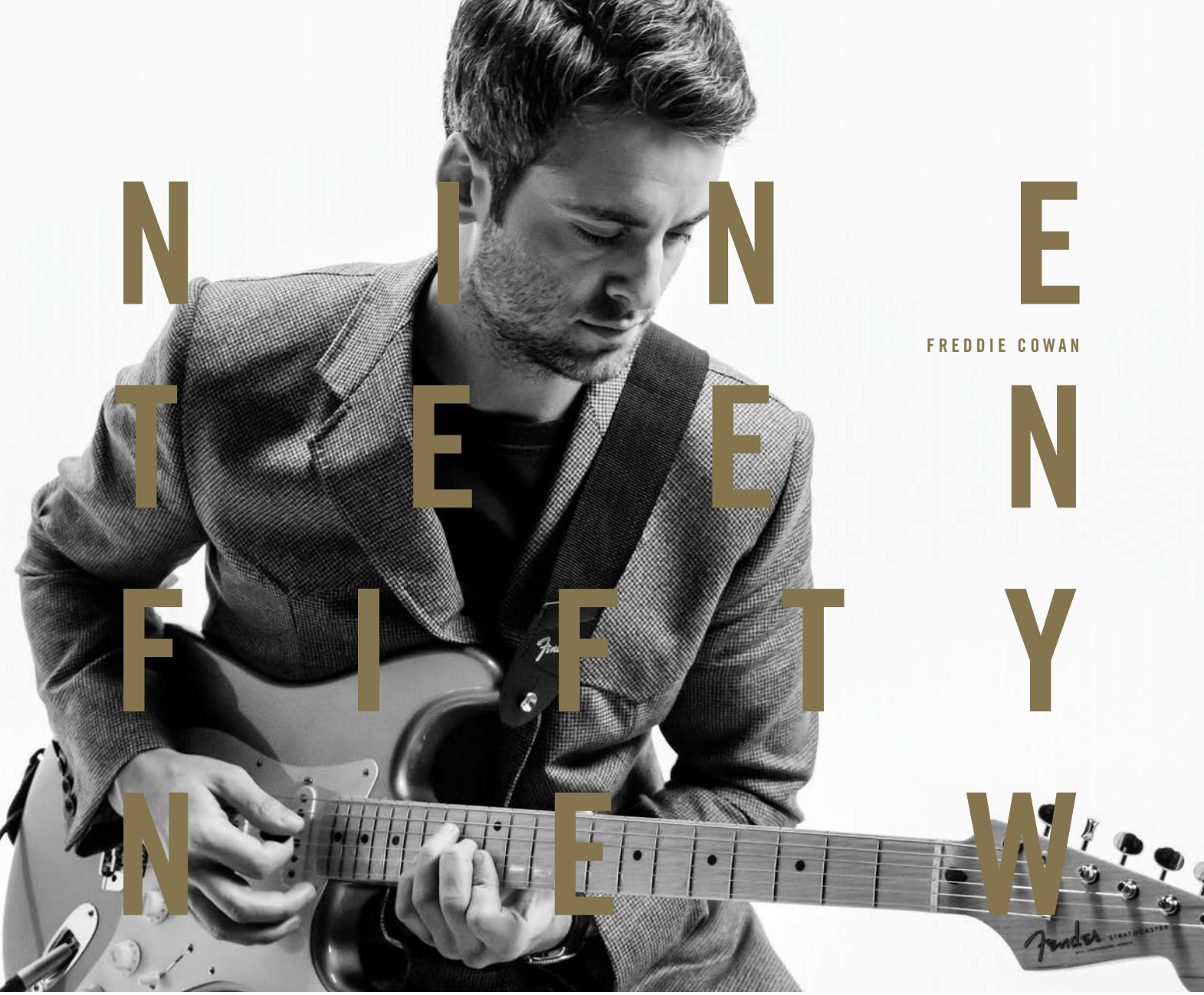
AFTER CBS

When they first moved to La Habra, Tadeo built a shop for his wife Petra that they called La Chiquita Market. Tadeo had always helped out at the shop after work and, according to his grandson Jim, they did great business selling 20-cent snow cones known as 'raspados' – often making up to $600 per day. People would come from miles around to buy them. Tadeo continued running La Chiquita with Petra until 1985, but was forced to close it due to ill health. The following year, he died from a cardio-respiratory arrest brought on by bronchitis and an infection. Petra passed away in 1989.

Until recently, Tadeo's family knew little about his exploits at Fender. One night, his grandson, Jim Gomez, was surfing the net and was shocked to discover Tadeo is actually quite famous. Jim, who has served three terms as mayor of La Habra, has since tried to learn as much as he can about his legacy. The family did have the 1928 Model T Ford that Tadeo brought from Jerome to La Habra, but sadly, Tadeo never brought a guitar home from work to leave as a family heirloom. According to Jim, his grandfather would occasionally bring home factory-reject necks for the children to play with, but they are all long gone.

Jim Gomez also told us that La Habra was still segregated when Tadeo built La Chiquita in an area designated for migrant workers.

Jim recalls his grandfather's kindness and compassion towards those people who suffered great hardship. He would give anybody credit in his store, and if they couldn't pay it off, he never chased them for the money. Family was the most important thing in Tadeo's life and Jim Gomez recalls a wonderful grandfather. He still thinks about him every day, but it's good to know that there are people all over the world who still think about Tadeo Gomez from time to time – and many of the guitars he helped build are still out there making music.



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